

THE DUKE'S  
HOUSE PARTY

WHY I CAUGHT  
THE  
*Duke*

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**WHY  
I CAUGHT  
THE DUKE**

THE DUKE'S HOUSE PARTY  
BOOK 3

*by*  
*Eva Devon*

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Why I Caught The Duke

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I am so grateful to have you Mr. Devon. We are so very lucky. And for my boys. Every day you teach me how big love is.

Louisa and Christy, you are my team. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

Of course, as always, this is for you. Thank you for always being with me.

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## CHAPTER I

“*J*ean Pierre is dead.”

Ice slipped through Grayson Edric Martin Wharley, the Duke of Talbot’s veins.

He had known Jean Pierre since they were children.

It wasn’t possible.

Grayson stood in the frigid air on the outskirts of a small village. His horse pawed the frost-covered earth, kicking up clods as hard as rocks.

The stallion immediately sensed the turmoil twisting inside Grayson.

The duke’s thick wool coat barely kept out the unrelenting damp and cold as winter barreled down on the war. But in that moment, he did not feel the cold, even as his breath puffed out white before him.

He felt nothing but a gaping chasm of horror.

He had come to meet with his friend, a friend he had known since childhood, a friend he had been meeting in secret over the years, passing information to him and collecting information from him.

Jean Pierre couldn’t be dead. He couldn’t be.

They were words he refused to truly comprehend. He could not imagine a world without Jean Pierre in it. He swallowed back a wave of nausea and stared at the young man with bright eyes and wild hair who had clearly come on a long ride, fast and hard, to relay this news.

The cold gray skies overhead turned the young man’s face into an austere mask.

“You’re mistaken. You have the wrong person,” Grayson bit out.

He shook his head, his dark hair whipping about his hard jaw, covered in stubble. “I don’t. It is going through the French camps. It is clear he has been killed, betrayed.”

“Betrayed?” Grayson echoed, trying to force himself to accept even as he railed against the possibility.

“He was declared a traitor.” The young man hesitated, a muscle ticking in his jaw as disgust clearly rushed through him. “They treated him horribly.”

Grim now, Grayson prompted, “Tell me.”

“They beat him, they stripped him naked, and they killed him. After they tortured him.”

Grayson’s insides clenched. It was tempting to fall to the ground, to weep, to beat the earth, to berate the heavens, to protest this possibility.

But such a thing would not help his friend. Jean Pierre was already cold if this was true. And his manner of death had been a gruesome one.

Did I do this? he thought to himself.

Was a letter intercepted? Did something he say betray his friend?

“How?” he demanded through gritted teeth. “How was he betrayed?”

The young man grimaced as drew in a shuddering breath before spitting out, “An English officer. A spy in his cups.”

Grayson blinked. The blows kept coming.

“What?” Grayson demanded. “Surely not.”

The unrelenting pain on the young man’s face was clear. “From my information through the networks, it is clear, Your Grace. The tribunal that reported on Jean Pierre saw the information too. The slip of his betrayal was collected in a tavern not far from Lyon. The man, English and drunk, gambling, let something slip about knowing Jean Pierre, about the trick they were playing on Napoleon. It must have been a



brag, you see. A boast about his position in the war and what he knew.”

“A brag?” he hissed. “Who the bloody hell would brag about knowing something like this? Who would put the life of someone like Jean Pierre at such risk over a drunken tavern night? A hand of cards or dice? Who?” he demanded. “Did the tribunal say who?”

The man nodded.

“My sources are clear,” he stated. “Edmond Brown.”

“My God,” Grayson whispered.

He had recruited Edmond five years ago. Edmond spoke perfect French, better than most Frenchmen. He knew how to act like a Frenchman, walk like a Frenchman, think like a Frenchman. After all, the man had spent several years of his childhood in France, just like Grayson had. He had thought Brown was safe, but he had no idea that the man was capable of such a loose tongue or dangerous behavior.

Usually, Grayson was fastidious in who he chose, but he had not spoken to Edmond in months. Could something have happened to the man? But he would not be able to forgive him even if it had. Not for this... Not in such a way.

For Jean Pierre had been Grayson’s closest friend when they were boys. Grayson had come to France every year for months to visit his mother’s family in Normandy.

As boys, they had run through the castle, over the beautiful land, ridden horses together, caught frogs, hunted, lived as boys do away from the roar and chaos of society.

Jean Pierre had been the son of Grayson’s tutor. Highly educated, well-read, but not a man of great import, and certainly not an aristocrat, a thing for which Grayson had been grateful once the revolution had come.

The truth was Jean Pierre had been close enough to the aristocracy that, even as a boy, he could have been executed for it.

His father certainly almost had been, but his father had become a proud member and citizen of the Jacobin Party. That had saved him.

Jean Pierre's father called for the equality of all men and women and had been a leading party member in the lead-up to the revolution.

But then the war within the Jacobin party had devoured Jean Pierre's mother and father. Seeing them cut apart by Madam Guillotine in the thirst for blood that came after the revolution had devastated Jean Pierre.

Revolutions, in Grayson's mind, were horrible things that killed the very people fighting for justice, seeking the right. No, the extremists usually won. Perhaps the revolution of the colonies from England might be a singularity, for in his mind he could not see how the French Revolution had helped anything by tearing down one terrible king to put up, eventually, another terrible dictator who thought himself a king.

Yes, Jean Pierre had kept it in his heart, his hate of the rulers of the Jacobin Party, and the way that France had gone after the end of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI.

And they had begun to communicate again in various ways, in secret, in hiding. Sometimes, he would take a small skiff across the channel with someone from Devon who knew the ways across such dangerous waters. And Jean Pierre and he would scheme and talk about how to end all the killing and the brutality now taking place across Europe.

For both of them had the hearts of idealists and could not bear to see innocents slaughtered. Even as children, they had loved the less loved things—spiders, webs, moths, and frogs.

Some people wished to destroy those things, to tear the wings off, to spit, to crush, but not he and Jean Pierre. They had been dragged into a war, forced to take up arms to stop the tyranny of one who would kill as many as he could for a golden throne and a crown and the title of emperor.

Napoleon did not care how many he had to kill. Europe was littered with the bodies of his ambition. And both Jean Pierre and Grayson knew they had to stop him. And so Jean Pierre, an officer in Napoleon's army, had begun to slip Grayson tactical information and information about other French officers so that Grayson might be able to help the generals and admirals of England's army, to stop what seemed like an unstoppable force.

Jean Pierre had known the risk.

Of course he had.

So had Grayson.

But this? This was not acceptable. Betrayal by a fellow spy? Betrayal by someone Grayson had recruited and selected to go behind enemy lines? No, this could not be borne.

He could not allow Jean Pierre's memory to slip away without justice.

And in that moment, the young face of his friend, bright-eyed, eager for life before all the killing had begun, flashed before Grayson. And the agony of it traveled through him with such speed he did indeed fall to the ice-covered ground.

A cry of horror escaped his lips, for if Jean Pierre had been killed, the world was a dark place indeed.

And in the end, it was his fault, for he had misjudged Edmond Brown most disastrously.

But Edmond Brown would certainly pay for it.

## CHAPTER 2

*A*gatha had learned to make the best of life at four years old.

After all, what could one do when their mama was constantly in a state of ecstasy or agony?

She had learned rather quickly that she could never quite know what her mama would be like from one moment to the next. But she did know that her mama was very much like a fairytale creature, a princess from a book.

She was forever shimmering and shining with moonlight in her hair and in her gown, jewels everywhere to be seen. Agatha's mother was the height of sophistication and the glory of all around. People seemed to sing odes to her mama! To think that she was the most beautiful creature, and the truth was Agatha agreed with them.

But after the death of her little brother... It was impossible to know if one day her mama would be smiling and happy, beautiful and charming, or in a complete state of collapse.

Sometimes it was a miracle her mama got up, went about her day, and dazzled all around her, for often her face was grim, her eyes red, her speech rapid, and her actions nonsensical.

Sometimes Agatha was afraid.

But the truth was, despite her mother's chaotic behavior, her mama loved Agatha dearly. She knew this with every fiber of her being, for her mama took her everywhere she went. Sometimes this meant leaving England. They often went abroad to Italy, and she realized how many dear friends her mama had. She was always going out with a young, beautiful, bright-eyed gentleman on her arm. And her mama would throw herself into every passionate friendship.

And as Agatha got older, she understood that her mama was desperately seeking love. A love she had never found, but one she kept trying to find with her kind but rather uninspiring husband.

Since she was always out, always seeking joy, Agatha had quickly learned that her mama was different than others and did not choose to follow the rules of most of the ton. For their family had wealth and power aplenty.

And as long as no one said anything outright, well, any behavior was allowed.

Agatha learned this well.

But the hard truth was Agatha did not want her mother's life.

She did not want to have to run to Naples, to hide, to spend time abroad, away from England, desperately chasing happiness. Desperately hoping that one day everything would be different.

And well... Agatha wanted love, a real chance at happiness, a family.

And she knew that the dark sorrow in people's hearts? It had to be overcome, but it could only be overcome if they wished it so.

For it did not matter how she tried, her mama's bright laugh could never hide the pain and loss of her little boy. No matter what Agatha did, she could not replace her brother. And so she hoped and watched as her mother waltzed through life trying to find happiness again... And failing.

But even so, her dear mama, her beautiful mama, would wrap Agatha in her arms, the scent of her perfume swallowing Agatha up, her jewels bouncing against her daughter's skin as she kissed the top of her head.

Agatha knew, despite her mother's sadness, how very loved she was, and she loved her mama in turn.

But when it came time for Agatha to come out, she had understood something quite well.

Her mama was only prevented from being a scandal through the sheerest chance.

Her father's power and her grandmama's power combined with the exceptional strength of their family name and wealth was what did it.

Agatha understood that truly, in the end, all that mattered was to be themselves if they had a powerful family. If one was to live their lives beyond the bounds of the ton, they had to be bold and have the right backing.

She was bold and had the right family. She was incredibly lucky. She knew it. And reveled in it.

For she did not wish to live in the bounds of the ton either.

It seemed like a dreary place, with all the ladies paraded out before all the men to find husbands, hoping, trying to find affection and love.

But in Agatha's mind's eye, so many a young lady married a gentleman, found a few months' happiness, and then the reality of marriage set in. She had seen it again and again as a young girl, watching the parade of society in her grandmama's and mother's salons.

Agatha would not allow that to happen to her.

No, she was going to know exactly *who* she wanted and when. And when she saw *him*, she was going to catch him.

She was not going to let anything stand in her way.

Not even the gentleman himself.

Of that she was certain, for Agatha was determined to be happy.

She had seen the cost of the alternative.

## CHAPTER 3

*L*ady Agatha dearly loved life.

After all, what was the point of it if not to love it?

She had seen darkness. She had seen destruction and wallowing in sorrow and self-pity.

Oh, perhaps she had not seen the approach of armies or the fall of cities, though with her mother's gallivanting across the continent, she had been fairly close to such things. Her mother did not see revolution as a reason not to travel or have a splendid time.

But Agatha, in the face of uncertainty and pain, had decided to love her life.

It did not matter what was transpiring around her, how awful things were, the darkness of her mother or the brightness either, how her father had long ago largely absented himself from their lives, retreating into rooms, reading books, intellectualizing all the world, and barely making his speeches at Parliament when required.

Life was full of disappointments. She had learned that years ago, and she was no longer interested in dwelling in them.

She shed disappointments. She dropped them, and like a butterfly, she let go of the cocoon and caterpillar. Wings were far more interesting to her than crawling about on legs.

So, she found herself at another house party, another place where her family was hoping that she would make a marriage. She wasn't exactly on the shelf. She wasn't old or an old maid. She had prospects, she could choose, and she knew her grandmama dearly wished her to do so. To choose, that was. And freely.

Agatha was grateful to her grandmama for it, but she knew that her grandmama was also wary.

Her own daughter, Agatha's mother, had chosen too soon at seventeen, certain that she was in love with her husband. It had not worked out, so Agatha had been given a great deal more time and indulgence, but the indulgence was beginning to wear out.

Grandmama had begun to make interesting suggestions that Agatha was going to turn out to be one of those rare ladies who never married but had adventures.

And frankly, it didn't sound very terrible to Agatha. Except she did long to know love. And in truth, she longed to have babies. She thought babies to be the most remarkable creatures, oftentimes far superior to their adult counterparts. They still seemed to see the world as if it was one of magic.

Agatha was convinced the world had to be magic and that all the adults had simply lost their ability to see it. And so, she did her very best to see magic everywhere she went. Life was far better when looked at with wonder and appreciation for beauty.

For if she did not do this, she knew that the dark bent that was in her mother's heart might come about in her own.

So, as she stood on the polished floor waiting to be asked to dance again, she lifted her chin, put back her shoulders, and beamed, for the music was superior this evening.

The Duke of Wildwood was a legend.

And now his house parties would be too.

This party was so grand that even the most jaded members of the ton seemed like children in a wonderland. The grand ballroom was decked out in all possible decorations. The room was a fairyland. All the ladies and gentlemen were dressed in the most perfect silks, jewels, laces, and feathers.

The gentlemen were particularly handsome, and the room was in a strange and rather exhilarated state, for no one could



recall a time when five dukes were at a party together.

Five young, marriageable dukes.

It was almost unbelievable.

Agatha smiled. Yes, she liked unbelievable, strange things. Frankly, she thought life was full of them.

Most people did not, which was why she thought most people were rather boring and determined to have sad lives. So, as she waited to be asked to dance again, though she had already danced several times, she began to sway to the music, caring not a whit what anyone thought.

Caring a whit what people thought got them into trouble.

Her grandmama stood at her side talking to Agatha's cousin. Her cousin did not particularly care for balls. Her cousin did not particularly care for society, and she adored her cousin to bits.

Her darling cousin cared most for reading and painting.

They were different and yet quite alike.

They both adored books, discussion, and art. But beyond that, they were quite unique.

She beamed at her cousin, who looked, well, stunned. The whole night was quite a revelation.

For the Duke of Wildwood had paid her cousin particular attention!

Agatha wouldn't mind if the Duke of Wildwood had paid her attention. He was a remarkably handsome man, but if he was interested in her cousin, she was delighted for her.

Besides... Someone else had struck her fancy and kept her mind racing with possibility.

It was then that she spotted *him* again.

He had already made a grand entrance.

She had seen him and felt herself transported!

Of course, how could she not see the five dukes who had marched in together? But he had been at the back, as if he had not truly wished to be seen.

Now, as the music came to a halt, she spotted him in the shadows, as if he was still trying to tuck himself away.

The sight of him when he'd entered with Wildwood had stolen her breath, but he had not chosen her to dance, much to her irritation. He had not seen her at all.

She knew, deep in her core, that she was to meet him this night.

She could not tear her gaze from him, hiding in the shadows, and the strangest desire to go across the room and ask him why he liked shadows so very much coursed through her.

Suddenly, she found herself doing something rather shocking, something that her grandmama might or might not approve of.

But frankly, she realized she didn't care.

She'd been taught for years that she could do almost anything that she pleased with her family name, and she liked being brave. She liked being unique.

And so, she turned to her grandmama, winked, and said, "I shall be right back."

Her grandmama gave her a knowing glance. "You're not about to do anything too scandalous, are you, my dear?"

"Just a bit," she confessed.

"And as long as it doesn't see you married to an absolute devil—"

"I would not marry him, as you know, Grandmama."

Her grandmama laughed. "My dear, Italy or America. Which are you planning?"

“I think America, don’t you?” she sallied. “I’ve been to Italy so many times before.”

And with that, she sashayed off through the crowd. Something about this particular duke pulled her to him. Now, she should not have been pulled, or been tempted, to cross the room to see such a man.

Young ladies did not approach dukes without an introduction! But she loved doing the opposite of what society said.

She had earned a reputation for it.

And instead of society casting her out, somehow it had endeared her to it. She was a jewel, she was beloved, and she could do no wrong.

Her reputation was rather tiring, really, but she was grateful too. Grateful that she had not been tarnished or hurt by being herself.

Luck was on her side. As was self-loyalty. Something she knew was not common.

She hoped one day that she would be able to repay that deep, abiding, uncomplicated, uncompromised love that she had known from her grandmother and her mother, and even her father too, though he seemed rather distant.

And so, when she slipped her slippered toe into the shadows at the corner of the room and peered up at the duke who was now glowering at her with remarkable skill, she asked, “For an extremely wealthy gentleman with such an excellent title, at a beautiful venue such as this, you do look as if you have been sucking on a lemon.” She quirked her lips. “Have you?”

His eyes, dark and beautiful, suddenly bulged with astonishment. “What?” he asked sharply.

“Been sucking on a lemon?” she repeated, hoping for clarification and a sign that she had shaken him a bit into a state of amusement.

“No,” he said, folding his arms across his beautifully broad chest.

“Ah,” she said, musing. “Someone stepped on your foot while you were dancing?”

His brow furrowed before he drawled, “Excuse me, young woman, are you well?”

“Very. I am in robust health,” she proclaimed brightly. “But I am merely trying to understand why a man of such good looks and good fortune could be in such a state and have such a look upon his rather chiseled features.”

“I beg your pardon,” he choked. “You think I am good-looking?”

She tsked and waved up and down, gesturing to his formidable form, which bore impeccably tailored clothes. “Of course, you are. Why would I say anything else? You know that you are good-looking, don’t you?”

His lips began to twitch, and she felt a little happiness. Something she always felt when she lifted someone in the darkness out of it.

Could she, she wondered, pull this man from the shadows?

She knew she shouldn’t. It was a terrible habit of hers, trying to help people in the darkness, but she didn’t like it when people lingered there.

She wanted to lift her lamp of joy and share it as much as she could. Life didn’t have to be terrible. She was certain of it. And perhaps it didn’t have to be terrible for him.

He didn’t look angry. That was clear to her.

No, he looked *sad*. His dark clothes draped a body that any god would envy.

His beautiful, thick hair wafted about his strong face, his strong shoulders were back, and his gaze was sardonic, yet he seemed amazed by her.

How did such a man find sorrow?

So many did, she knew, but she wished...

And in that moment, her heart did something quite strange... It *chose* him.

As if it was calling to him.

And she remembered that vow she had made to herself years ago—that she would know *her* fellow when she saw him—and she realized that this was *him* indeed.

She was going to catch him. She didn't need to know anything about him.

No, because her *heart* already knew.

## CHAPTER 4

Grayson should have found the young woman all but bouncing before him to be horrifying, but much to his dismay, that was not his current response.

In fact, he could not tell if he was captivated or appalled. She was, for all intents and purposes, liquid sunshine. She seemed completely in love with life, and given his current state of mind and mood, that was the last thing he thought he would be interested in.

Yet, his body was definitely arguing with his mind.

She was beautiful but not in any particularly accepted sort of way. Her face was one of openness, mischief, and pleasure. Her eyes were round bright orbs, her lips formed a Cupid's bow, and she looked as if she was about to say something terribly clever and teasing at any possible moment. Her looks matched her reality, for she had come up to him without any introduction and begun a conversation that was indeed mischievous.

"Excuse me, young woman," he said, doing his best to seem imposing. "Who do you belong to?"

At that, her brow shot up in clear indignation. "Belong to, good sir? Your Grace, I did not realize you would be so old-fashioned as to think of me as chattel." She snorted. "Do you?"

"Do I what?" he said.

"Think of me as chattel."

He let out a bark of a laugh. "No, young woman, I see you as a person. A rude, impossible person who has gone around the rules of society."

"Yes, isn't it delightful?" she declared.

“No,” he returned, though he did feel something whispering through him that was akin to delight. “Someone needs to take you in hand. Surely, there is a governess about.”

Her mouth dropped open for an instant before she gathered herself.

“Do I look that young?” she queried.

He nearly threw up his hands in exasperation, and yet he found her utterly fascinating. She was doing something to him, pushing back the darkness bit by bit, but he *clung* to his darkness. He needed it, and so he scowled at her.

“Go away,” he instructed.

“Wouldn’t you like to dance with me instead?” she countered.

Her audacity was mind boggling. And he loved it. But he did not have time to love it, surely.

“What about my face,” he growled softly, “suggests that I would wish to dance with you?”

She tilted her head to the side and pursed her lips. “Well, you did just dance with a young woman. You are standing in a ballroom, and I am a particularly good dancer. We could have a great deal of fun, and I’m sure that the next one is a reel. You look as if you would be quite good at reels.”

She nodded. “Very strong legs and all that sort of stuff.”

He gaped at her for a moment before he blurted, “Did you just mention my limbs?”

“I did.” She laughed. “I know, it is a bit shocking. Perhaps I should introduce myself.”

“Please do,” he said. “I must know what family has produced you.”

She beamed up at him. “I am Lady Agatha Graceborough.”

He let out a groan. “Of course you are.”

She sighed. “Ah, I see my family’s reputation does precede me.”

“It certainly explains a great deal about you,” he agreed. “You do realize that you could get yourself into terrible trouble.”

“I know,” she said easily. “Isn’t it rather grand?”

“No,” he replied firmly. “I might be an absolutely terrible person who could eat you up and spit you out.”

“Is that what you’re going to do?” she queried, her eyes widening with mock horror. “Eat me up?”

Those words did the most shocking thing to him.

They brought him to life, fully and completely, in that instant.

*Eat her up?*

Perhaps.

She was delectable.

There was no question, and even more so, the cleverness of her turn of phrase, the way she refused to be daunted?

Well, it surprised him and set his blood afire.

“I don’t know about you, sir, but I cannot bear to see someone so entirely unhappy at a party, and so I crossed the room to...”

“Lift my spirits?” he cut in.

She nodded. “Yes, I’m glad you understand.”

“They cannot be lifted,” he informed, wishing to rid her of her misguided goals.

“That is actually a lie,” she said with surprising determination. “Perhaps you believe it to be true, but it is not possible. If your spirits are very low, the only place for them to go is up.”



He did not know what to say to that. He found it extremely irritating and perplexing because it was also very logical. He was not used to people arguing with his sorrow, with his melancholy.

No, they steered clear of him or made great apologies for his state of affairs. And then there were his fellow dukes—all helping him to wield his melancholy rather than to succumb to it.

But most were frightened of him because they felt he was unhinged. The vast majority of people now acted as if he was going to do something completely unexpected, but then that's exactly what *she* was doing.

Things that were unexpected.

He peered down at her, and then before he could stop himself, he found himself whispering, "I suppose it would not hurt if I asked you to dance."

"It will not hurt." A look of pride gleamed in her eyes and she smiled. "I promise you it shall be pleasurable."

"Promises are very hard to keep," he warned. "Truly, they shouldn't be made."

She shook her head. "Argue as you will, but you're going to find me very pleasurable indeed."

He felt himself heat at her words. Did she understand what she was saying? Given her mother, he rather thought she might, but he didn't want to be unkind or rude despite the growing attraction traveling through him.

He was not here, though, for this sort of thing.

No, he was here for revenge, to get Edmund Brown, and he was going to do so.

But nor could he allow himself to dwell in complete melancholia, lest Brown suspect something.

It had been driven home to him by his friends that he had to appear in stable humor, as if nothing was horribly amiss,

when he was in public.

He had clearly been failing. This young lady approaching him to cheer him was clear indication of it. He couldn't help but admire her for her sentiments. But then something occurred to him, and he barked, "Are you trying to find a husband?"

"Why?" she queried. "Are you looking for a wife?"

He let out a croak of laughter. "Dear God, you are bold."

"Yes, I am," she affirmed pleasantly. "I learned early on that it is the best way to be and to say exactly what one is thinking. Lies are boring and really only lead to trouble."

"I cannot argue with that," he said, but then he added, "but sometimes lies are necessary."

She gave a shake of her head. "I cannot agree with you. They only make difficulty farther down the road."

The statement only showed her naivety, even if she thought herself experienced.

"Sometimes," he said, "telling the truth sees people dead."

She swallowed. "My goodness, that was a rather dark turn to our conversation. Would you care to elucidate?"

"No," he bit out.

"Oh, dear," she said. "Well, then are you encouraging me to subterfuge?"

"You?" he said, looking her up and down and feeling a surge of desire at her curves beneath her pale gown. "I doubt you are capable of it."

"You'd be surprised by what I'm capable of," she returned.

And then, despite himself, he smiled! His lips turned in a bloody smile!

He held his hand out to her then, palm up. "All right, Lady Agatha, it seems you are used to getting what you want, and in this case, I shall give in to you."

“Doesn’t that feel delightful?” she cheered.

He shook his head. “I don’t follow.”

“Giving in.” She wagged her brows. “Sometimes that is the only thing to do!”

He let out a groan. “You are impossible.”

“But terribly fun,” she countered. “Now, come along, Your Grace. Come along.”

And with that, she slipped her hand into his.

The feel of her gloved hand in his, small yet capable, sent a jolt up his arm and straight to his heart.

For a moment, he could not think or breathe. He merely felt her hand in his.

They headed to the floor and crossed the perfectly waxed boards. He had endured a waltz earlier with a perfectly acceptable young lady, but he hoped he would not have to dance another.

The music came up, a bouncing, exciting reel, and he stared into her face. A face that was captivating, one that seemed to be completely defiant of life’s challenges.

Her eyes shone with amusement and excitement and hope.

Yes, her entire being shone with hope and, quite frankly, her inner joy shone with such an intensity that he nearly gasped. He prayed no one ever conquered that joy, that she never married a man who would treat her cruelly or less than she deserved.

For he was fairly certain that she deserved the greatest things this life could offer, but in his experience, life crushed people like her.

Yes, life took apart people of her sort before they could reach the age of twenty-five.

Their hopes, their dreams, their aspirations were crushed, and certainly all their idealism was gone as they realized that

life was unyielding.

And he would not do that to her.

He was good at cutting people to the quick, but not her. He could not do it to her. He had seen far too much hope annihilated. He would not be the one to take hers.

And so as the music began and filled the room with its lilting air, he led her in a dance meant to cause happiness, and he found for a single moment that the dark began to slip away.

She grinned up at him, spotting that darkness recede. "There! Not so very hard, is it?"

How he wanted to tell her that it was hard, harder than anything he'd ever done, to feel this moment of happiness with her.

To allow himself to dance a reel, to bounce from foot to foot, to turn her under his arm, to go up and down the floor, jumping and jolting and clapping as if the world was still a magnificent place should have taken great deal of effort.

But it was not hard.

For with her in his arms, he felt as if this world was one in which Jean Pierre was still alive, where they were still full of hope and possibilities, where idealism still was the rule of the day, where tyrants could be destroyed, where love still ruled.

Then, after much sprightly movement, the music came to an end, and they came to a stop. Her cheeks were bright with the exertion, and she held tightly to him.

And he wondered as he looked down upon her beautiful face, how cruel life was that it took so many beautiful, young things and destroyed them.

And there. . . after escaping it for a few moments, the melancholy crashed back upon him.

Her smile dimmed a bit, but she lifted her chin and leaned towards him. "I know, Your Grace. I see it."

"What?" he rasped.

She shook her head. “The darkness. It is back.”

“It never actually left,” he replied, and that was the truth.

## CHAPTER 5

“Och man, you’re in for it.”

Grayson arched his brow at the Duke of Glenfoyle. “Only if you mean I’m going to be jailed for the murder of Brown.”

Glenfoyle rolled his eyes. “Don’t be absurd. You followed my meaning.”

“I didn’t,” Talbot riposted but he had.

Still, he was going to make Glenfoyle enunciate every word of his implications.

“The lass,” Glenfoyle indicated, jerking his head ever so slightly in the direction of the ballroom floor. “She’s the most popular lady here tonight. Or so I think.”

Talbot ground his teeth.

Glenfoyle seemed to be correct on that particular point. The young woman, Lady Agatha, had an inner confidence emanating from her with such intensity that everyone wanted to be near her.

She was joyful, compelling beyond compare, and he found it extremely irritating because, like all the others, he longed to be within her sphere of glow.

But he was no fool. Or at least he was determined not to be.

Surely, he did not have time for that sort of thing.

No. He was here with a purpose, and that purpose did not include basking in the excellent company of an undeniably captivating young woman.

“You should ask her to dance again.”

He should absolutely *not* ask her to. “No.”

Glenfoyle swung his gaze to him. “Why ever not? You like her.”

“We have other things to do right now,” he reminded. “Other things than jumping up and down on a waxed ballroom floor.”

He and the other four dukes had made a pact together to somehow survive the darkness and melancholy of the last year’s events. The horror, which they had all felt for different reasons, had caused them to come together, swearing revenge, and it all largely had to do with when he had stared into a pit of darkness and had almost thrown himself into it. Literally and figuratively.

The dark swirling waters of the River Thames had loomed before him, and he remembered the voice whispering in his head to jump in, to let himself be taken by the dark waters. To be bashed against the bridge’s arched pillars.

If he had done so, the racing water would have done the trick. And he would already be gone, dead to the world, mercifully free of suffering.

If it hadn’t been for the Duke of Wildwood and his other friends who had pulled him back and convinced him that life was indeed worth living, that they could fight for something... He would have exited this brutal world.

His gaze followed Agatha.

Perhaps there was more left than just revenge.

He sucked in a quick breath. He did not dare think it, but as he looked back at Glenfoyle, then again to the young woman who was dancing spritely across the floor with a gentleman who was looking at her as if she was the cream and he the cat, Grayson considered.

They had had the good sense not to dance two dances in succession.

Even Lady Agatha had not suggested such a thing. He was rather relieved. There had been a moment when he’d been

certain she was not going to let him go on the dance floor, that she'd hold him up again to arc and tilt and lilt about the room.

Glenfoyle's lips twitched. "I never did think to see a mon such as you jump about to the reel. I had no idea you were so light on your feet and could do such intricate patterns. Someone like you seems far more inclined towards the waltz."

He huffed a breath and folded his hands behind his back. "The waltz is annoying. And as to the reel? Well, the young lady has excellent skill and made me look a better dancer than I am."

Glenfoyle drawled, "The young lady seems to pull anyone she wants within her sphere and cheer them immensely. She would be a good tonic for you."

"She is not a medicine," Talbot gritted. It was not as if he could swallow her whole. A wave of desire rushed through him.

He wouldn't mind swallowing parts of her, taking her into his mouth and savoring her.

What an experience that would be.

Oh, he would not mind, indeed, to do such a thing with her. And even though he was trying mightily, he could not seem to get his mind to wander away from the curve of her hips, the light in her eyes, the fullness of her lips, or the way in which she seemed to live life with complete abandon.

No doubt she would feel that way in everything she did, but he could not take her down his path.

And he could not follow her down hers either, could he?

Did he dare?

No, he could not.

And yet he had seen the way the Duke of Wildwood was looking at the young lady in his arms earlier this evening.

The entire endeavor of the house party was not going according to plan, and it had not even been twelve hours since



it had commenced.

Even so, a voice deep within him, one that defied all reason and best intentions, urged him to pull her close. And this voice? He could not ignore it.

As a spy, he knew that listening to this internal voice was extremely important. He only ever had gotten himself into severe difficulty when he'd ignored that voice.

“Go on,” Glenfoyle urged again. “Ask her to dance. I can see you desperately long to do it. You are halfway there as it is.”

He let out a low groan. “Is it that obvious?”

Glenfoyle snorted. “You’ve been in such a state of misery, and most of us are half afraid you’re going to knife Edmond Brown in a hallway. So yes, the change in your emotions around her is quite evident. You’re looking at her as if—”

“What?” he demanded.

“You have hope.”

Hope. Hope was such a dangerous thing. Some people said it was the most important thing, but in his experience, hope made men continue on the same path, even when it was leading them to their destruction.

And yet... Hope kept people alive.

Did he dare to entertain hope of happiness?

Perhaps that’s what his inner voice was urging. He doubted it. For that voice was always a part of his war work.

That voice had once whispered that Brown seemed a bit off one night, but then? He’d ignored it, determined to only see a loyal, capable man.

Now? He never ignored that whisper.

So, if it was telling him to cross the room and return to Agatha? Perhaps she was to be a part of his revenge. He had no idea how. But he was not about to ignore his instincts.

Not again. Not when such a thing led to death.

“Och,” Glenfoyle tsked.

“What?” he asked, swallowing.

“I can see the wheels literally turning in your brain. You are up to something, aren’t you?” Glenfoyle’s gaze narrowed. “Please don’t drag her into something difficult. She seems far too kind. And her mother has given her a great deal of difficulty all her life. She deserves a bit of peace.”

“I don’t follow,” he replied, surprised by his friend’s comment. For Glenfoyle was not usually one for gossip.

“You know who her mother is?” the Scottish duke challenged.

“Of course, I do. Doesn’t everyone in the ton?”

Glenfoyle blew out a frustrated breath. “Can you imagine living like that?”

Grayson scoffed. “Surely, she was in the nursery somewhere, or protected by an army of governesses. She must not have been allowed to know her mother’s exploits.”

Glenfoyle gave his head a tight shake. “That lass has traveled the continent over thrice. She has lived in Naples and been to half the capitals of Europe. She has seen a world that most young ladies cannot ever hope to understand, and she has seen the revolving line of young men on her mother’s arm. Her mother took her everywhere, and from what I understand, let her see far too much.”

Grayson ground his teeth. So that was the way of it. He felt a moment of sorrow for her because the truth was he had had the happiest of childhoods, with a mother and father who had loved each other dearly and doted on him. He had grown up to believe that everything always turned out.

Even with the vast array of history that he had read, and despite knowing the propensity of man to slaughter man, somehow deep in his heart, he had not been prepared for the

cruelty that would befall him. Or to Jean Pierre. Or to the world at large when the revolution happened.

But it seemed that the beautiful, bright young woman entrancing all before him had had a front row seat to the fall of Europe and cruelty.

The reality of life.

He was stunned.

Yes, perhaps she was just the person for him, and perhaps she needed someone like *him*.

Someone who could teach her to navigate the strangeness of life. It hit him then. Perhaps she already knew. Perhaps he was being arrogant in the extreme.

Perhaps she had things to teach him, but the whispering inside him was only growing louder. And he knew that this time it was his turn to go to her.

Without waiting for another word from Glenfoyle, he departed and crossed the ballroom.

He cut through the crowded room, which quickly made way for him, and stopped before her and her dance partner as they stepped off the floor.

Breathless, her beautiful bosom rose up and down with shortness of breath, pressing the curves against her simple embroidered neckline.

Her hair tumbled beautifully about her face. And her eyes shown as if every moment had been a wonder.

Her dancing partner seemed reticent to let her go.

Clearly, the fellow had had the intention of taking her to the punch table or perhaps to get a breath of fresh air outside.

“Dance with me?” Talbot asked, thrusting his gloved hand at her.

She gave a quick curtsy, a jolly gesture. “Of course I shall, Your Grace.”

Her former partner gave a quick if petulant bow and strode off, seeking new quarry.

With that, she put her hand in Grayson's.

And he knew he was doomed. For whatever resistance he had been determined to feel melted away.

## CHAPTER 6

*I* was working!

Agatha did not know how or why, but the Duke of Talbot had not been able to take his eyes off her since the reel. She felt his gaze upon her like a hot caress.

Having his eyes upon her was an embrace, making her feel both desired and on edge at once.

It was difficult to describe the feeling he evoked in her. She'd never felt it in her whole life. It was as if she had suddenly been given a surge of that famous electricity used in so many therapies.

Yes, this was meant to be!

It had to be.

She'd been waiting for him her whole life. It was the only explanation for the feelings coursing through her. When he crossed the room, seeking her out, she'd felt a well of triumph deep within her bubble up, and she could not stop her smile.

But she did not truly wish to dance again.

She had danced many times this evening. She had already danced with him and felt his hand underneath her own, his fingers guiding her waist to jump and leap about during the reel.

No, she wanted something else entirely, and though she was not usually given to acts of silliness, she decided it was time for her to use an act of female silliness to get her way.

She gazed up at his handsome features, batted her lashes quickly, placed her hand to her brow, and gave a quick little sigh. "Oh, dear," she exclaimed, giving him a subtle wink. "I am finding that I need fresh air. Your Grace, would you be so kind as to take me out to the balcony to collect myself? A bit of cool air would be just the thing."

He arched a brow at her, clearly suspicious.

The wink had to have helped, for she did not want him to think that she was a woolly brained female incapable of dancing the night away without succumbing to the vapors. She did not know if he would take her up on her request. He could just simply redirect her to her grandmama to take her out for a rest or to the cloak room.

But he did exactly what she hoped.

He inclined his head, gave her his arm, and then began to guide her out through the open doors to the fairyland of lights along the balustrade that cascaded down into the magnificent gardens.

Gardens which were now mostly cast in shadow.

There were lanterns placed artfully along the paths, leading couples to temptation. But she did not think the duke would go into those secret places. After all, they had known each other but minutes.

Still, she nearly gasped at the idea of heading down one of those paths in his arms.

It did not matter that she did not know him well. Her soul did. Her body did. Her instincts did. And she had learned long ago to trust her soul. It was far wiser than any intellect.

Thinking was important, of course. She read a great deal. She loved philosophy. She had great suspicion of people like Newton and Descartes, but she did love the writings of so many of the philosophers that had come before.

She had read Plato and Aristotle. She had read Marcus Aurelius and some of the writings that had come out of the East. She had had to, for she had grown up in such a cacophony of sensation and sensuality and entertainments that she'd nearly lost her head.

And losing one's head? Well, the French knew all about that and how dangerous it was.

Excess could be fun, but excess could also be fatal.

So, she had learned to let her head float whilst keeping her feet firmly on the ground. She was no silly piece.

Even in this moment of flight and fancy as she allowed the duke to escort her out into the cooler air, away from the crush of people and the heat of the ballroom, she knew that she was risking ruin.

But to her, ruin was not nearly as serious a consideration as it was to most of the young ladies in the ballroom. She had her own fortune. If she was ruined tomorrow, she could do whatever she pleased and not fear a wit of it.

Her mother had caused so much talk behind fans that, well... She could not likely supersede her in it.

“What is this about?” the Duke of Talbot finally growled, his voice a rough, gravelly caress over her skin, which only caused it to prickle with anticipation.

She found her entire body growing taut as if he had taken his hand and stroked his fingers along her back and arms. How did he do that? Did his voice do that to everyone, or just to her?

She crossed the stone balcony and placed her hands on the balustrade before she looked out to the gardens and said, “I wanted to know you better. And it’s very difficult to know one in a ballroom.”

He followed slowly behind her. He lingered there, deliciously close.

Was he a rake, a ruiner?

She did not think so. There was something in him that was deep and sorrowful and profound, and that kind of person did not lend themselves to the acts of a rake. For if they were sorrowful and deep and profound and a rake, there was usually a cruel self-indulgent streak there as well. As if the person had decided that throwing themselves into hell and indulgence was the only thing for it.

The Duke of Talbot did not emanate cruelty or self-indulgence.

“Why the devil,” he asked, “would you wish to know me better?”

“I don’t know,” she said with a simple shrug.

“Well, that’s a ridiculous reply.”

“No, it is not,” she defended swiftly. “It’s an honest one. Would you care for me to lie to you and create some elaborate answer to praise you and flatter you?”

“It might be nice,” he said. “For a moment, at any rate.”

She laughed at that. “I don’t think you mean it. I think you think flatterers are sycophants.”

“You assume a great deal,” he returned, “knowing me so little.”

“Perhaps, but I look at you and I see...”

His face grew still in the moonlight, stony, granite, unreadable, as if he was trying on purpose to make it so that she could not see within him. But she did. She did not know how, but she looked up into his gaze and saw.

“You’re hurting very much, aren’t you?” she murmured, longing to soothe those hurts.

He drew in a sharp breath. “What the bloody hell does that mean?”

“I’ve clearly hit a nerve,” she observed.

“You bloody well have,” he replied tightly. “Now keep yourself to yourself.”

“Alas, that is not one of my better skills,” she informed, tracing the stone railing beneath her hands with a gloved fingertip. “You see, my life has largely been seeing how everyone else feels and helping them with their emotions.”

“That sounds bloody exhausting,” he admitted at last.



“It can be,” she allowed. “And I have to be very careful, because if I’m repairing everyone all the time and no one is repairing me, it grows quite wearing. I got quite close to the edge when I was a girl, always managing my mother, but I learned... I learned how to take care of her *and* myself.”

“Did you?” he prompted softly. “Most never do.”

“I discovered books,” she rushed, unburdening herself, amazed that she felt she could. “I also discovered dancing and long walks and enjoying life and realizing how much better off I was than everyone else. Not in a superior way,” she said swiftly. “But in a way that I should thank God and the heavens and the universe for what I have every day.”

“Would you renounce it,” he asked abruptly, “if it meant everyone could have a better life?”

The words perplexed her, for she had often felt guilt at having so much. “I’m not sure I understand your question,” she said.

“Was it not clear?”

“No, it wasn’t,” she said. “Are you asking if I would live a life of pain and poverty and suffering and illness if it meant that everyone else could have comfort? Is that what you’re asking?”

“Yes, I suppose it is given what you were saying just a moment before.”

“I don’t know,” she breathed.

“There is that answer again.”

“You see,” she carried on, ignoring him. “What you’re asking is if I’m selfless, and I’m not. I am not without self. I quite like myself, you know. And I would have to give it up in many ways to do what you suggest. Now, if I could have us all know love in our hearts and to never be broken, I would wish for that beyond all things. If I could make it so, I would in a moment. But to throw myself away and be crushed entirely? I’m not sure I have the strength for it. I would like to believe I

do,” she said. “That I could sacrifice myself and allow everyone else to know peace and happiness.”

He paused. “You should not wish such a thing,” he said.

She licked her lips, uncertain. “Why?”

A long pause followed, but it did not feel hollow. In fact, the air fairly reverberated with the power of his emotions before he began. “Because such a sacrifice for all means that those who benefit shall forever be tarnished. So I like what you said,” he said softly, his voice deeper than before, the rigidity going away and his gaze seeming to deepen as he looked upon her. “You must not ever wish to be without a self. You are right. You are interesting and a full person and you should never sacrifice all of that for anyone.”

“Not even for family?” she asked.

“No,” he replied.

“Or a husband?”

“Certainly not,” he retorted.

“Most men would not say such a thing,” she pointed out. “They seem to think that their wives should be selfless, or at least that is what I have seen in all my travels.”

“And unlike so many, you have traveled a great deal,” he observed.

“I have,” she agreed, wishing she hadn’t seen so much suffering. And yet, it had taught her a great deal. “I have had the opportunity to witness many couples, and it seems to me that the lady is meant to eschew any of the traits which the husband finds difficult, challenging, or unpleasant. She is to pare herself like a tree until she grows to his fashion. What do you think of that?” she asked.

“I think it is nonsensical and extremely arrogant of men to desire such a thing.”

She laughed then, stunned and relieved at once. “Not many would think that.”

“You have not been exposed to the right gentlemen. All my friends think the way that I do.”

“My goodness,” she said. “You are a select breed.”

“Yes,” he said without apology. “Though I wish there were far more of us.”

“You and I,” she said, “are quite a pair.”

“What do you mean?” he asked softly.

“We are both wishing. Are we not?”

A muscle tightened in his jaw. He tilted his head to the side ever so slightly, and as if he could not stop himself, he lifted his hand to her cheek.

At that moment, a soft breeze blew from the north, teasing the soft fragrant scent of roses all around them.

His fingertips traced along her skin before he cupped her face carefully in his palm.

“Wishing,” he said, “is a very dangerous thing.”

## CHAPTER 7

Grayson drank in her beautiful, luminescent face, which glowed with the promise of so much. Peace, joy, warmth... Desire.

Peace did not truly lie before him. It never could.

Still, he could not force himself to pull away from her. He knew he should. He should thrust her away, walk away, turn her hopeful heart down. Tell her that hope and wishes were false paths that only led to pain.

He did not hope. No. That was not what kept him going. Revenge was the only thing that had kept him going, and the support of his friends.

Even as his fingertips brushed her cheek, he knew that if he was not careful, he could twist her, mar her with his dark heart.

He knew that there were still veins of love in that organ of his. The way he missed his friend, the way he wanted the war to end. The way some secret part of himself longed for it to all be worth it—that the killing, the death, the fighting, the betrayals, the families brutalized, brother betraying brother, friend betraying friend, would all turn out well in the end.

Even now, knowing the cruelty of the world, he had to believe it could still work out, or what else was this life for?

He could not see the great workings of God or the universe in the day-to-day myriad madness of man. But he had to believe that just as the tree grew, its limbs reaching out and its leaves growing only to fall to feed the earth, to feed the tree, to grow again in some mystic, marvelous cycle... He had to believe that that was how life was too.

Though he could not see the reason for the suffering and pain, there had to be some great picture or else he would just

lie down now and let himself wither away.

He'd looked at that road before, and it had led him to the Thames. He could not do it again. And just as he was about to draw his hand back from her face, a cacophony of sound came from the ballroom behind him and, on impulse, he lowered his hand, took hers in his, and without word, without warning, without any indication of asking for permission, he began to lead her down the stone stairs into the winding garden.

He guided her through beautiful hedges and out into the vast darkness. Not a darkness of the mind or the heart, but a place where they could be alone.

She did not resist him.

He was surprised.

She did not even put up a peep of denial but went with him as if it was the most natural thing to do.

As if they were meant to be together.

Such a phrase was mad, impossible. He did not believe in fate or in love at first sight. He did not believe in the unification of souls.

No. He knew that his instinct told him to whisk her into the garden, and therefore he'd done it. That's all this was. And as he felt her warm hand in his, he led her through the manicured paths until, at last, they found themselves in the twisting hedges of one of the small maze-like areas of Wildwood's vast gardens. And as he turned to her, the silvery moonlight spilling down over them both, bathing them in a blue hue of light, she cocked her head to the side.

"I promised myself that I would not be silly," she began. "All acts of silliness would be calculated, rather like my false case of the vapors. But dashing out here now seems a silly thing to do." She licked her lips, her gaze searching over his face. "And I am showing how much I trust you. Most people would consider that very silly indeed. Yet somehow, I know that I am safe with you."

“How do you know?” he asked, marveling at her.

“I don’t know,” she replied honestly.

“You like that phrase,” he said.

It mystified him, her willingness to commit to the fact that she didn’t know.

“I don’t,” she said clearly. “So to say otherwise seems just absurd, and the truth is,” she continued, “I’m open to the idea of understanding why. And I hope that eventually one day I will, but I only know this. When I do not do as my heart urges, dark things come into my life. When I deny myself, that is when things go wrong, not the opposite. Society’s rules and edicts are all well and good, but often they push us far, far away from ourselves.”

He swallowed at that. How was she so wise? She was still young.

She could not be more than twenty, but she seemed to understand things that most did not.

“Are we going to be different than the others?” she asked softly.

“Than the others?” he queried, his voice a low rumble. Then he added without hesitation, “Yes.”

All the people bumbling about in society, denying how others truly felt? That was madness.

“We *are* different, aren’t we, you and I?” she breathed, leaning in towards him. “We’re not going to behave as expected. We’re simply going to give in to how we feel.”

“And how do you feel?” he asked suddenly, his nerves a jangle.

She hesitated but then declared, “I know that you are mine.”

He blinked. He should immediately tell her that he could never be hers. And yet the words would not come to his lips. He could not force himself to tell her that she was mistaken.

Who was he to tell her that she was mistaken?

He let out a soft breath. “You think very highly of me for knowing so little.”

“I think very highly of myself,” she returned.

He laughed at this remarkable reply, not because he was amused, but because he was full of admiration. “Touché, madam. I appreciate that. I am much the same.”

“How?” she queried.

“I always trust my instincts, always, and when I have not, they have gotten me into trouble.”

“And what are your instincts telling you?” she whispered.

He lowered his head, his lips inches from hers. “That you and I are meant to be together, at least certainly here. I am meant to be by your side. You are meant to be by mine. I do not know why. Just as you do not, but I will not fight that.”

“Why *are* you here?” she asked suddenly.

“I beg your pardon.”

“Why are you here?” she said again, slightly more forcefully.

He cleared his throat, slightly jarred. “As in the earth? The world? Why have I been born? Are you asking some great metaphysical question? Are you asking if I exist rather like Descartes?” His gaze trailed to her lips. “I promise I think therefore I am.”

She tsked. “I find Descartes to be extremely infuriating, if you must know. The absurd idea that my mind is somehow separate from my body, as if I’m a bit of moving parts with a soul that does not come into my heart. Ridiculous,” she said. “I’m as much my body as I am anything.”

It was a shocking statement.

The age of reason denied the body and said that the mind was all, that the soul had nothing to do with the physical.

“You are rather strange,” he said, both taken aback and captivated.

“I am glad I am,” she said, “for I have seen the unhappiness this new thinking has caused, this idea of separation from the earth, from the air, from the trees, as if my thinking was the most superior thing. The truth is, I have seen people think themselves into disaster. My mother over and over again with whirling thoughts, convincing herself of things that were not true, fearing what other people thought.”

“Your mother feared what other people thought?” he gasped, quite surprised.

She bit down on her lip, pushing back the pain of those memories before she admitted, “Oh yes, all the time, but much like me, she could not deny herself. The difference between us is I refuse to be afraid of others. What is the point? Life continues on.”

He gaped at her.

It was a monumental statement for one so young to understand. She was not mistaken. Life *did* continue on.

“You are a mystery,” he breathed.

“Why?” she challenged. “Because I say such things?”

“Yes,” he stated. “No one else I know would say such a thing. You do not seem to think little of life and yet to say such a thing—”

“I think a great deal of life,” she cut in swiftly. “I have seen suffering. I have seen people throw so much away. All we can do is enjoy right now and live right now fully and honor all those that came before us.”

Her words crashed through him.

*Honor all those who came before us.*

Was that why he was living? Was that why he was alive? Was it his duty to live fully, entirely, so that those who had already died could have some meaning?



It ricocheted around his brain and then his soul.

He did not feel he could give credence to it.

He only had one goal at present, and she seemed to be pulling him away from it. And yet his instinct insisted she was a part of his journey to revenge.

He knew it deep in his bones, and when he gazed down upon her face, her lips, an overwhelming urge swallowed him up.

“I want to kiss you,” he rasped.

“Of course you do,” she returned. “You are supposed to.”

“I am?” he queried astonished.

“Oh yes. I knew it the moment I saw you. You were going to be the one. The one to kiss me, the one to be with me. I have been waiting for you for years,” she said.

“That’s a lot to live up to,” he replied.

She stepped towards him, her body now brushing his.

“You’re going to,” she said.

But he did not know if he could.

## CHAPTER 8

*As* she tilted her head back, parting her lips ever so slightly, welcoming the duke's kiss, she knew she'd chosen a path from which there was no retreating.

Nor did she wish to. No. She wished to confidently bolt down it. So, when his lips took hers, she gave in with full abandon, sliding her hands up over his shoulders to the nape of his neck, pulling him towards her, embracing him as if she could make them one with the full force of her will.

He matched her intensity, both of them understanding that this was unlike anything they'd ever known. Pulling each other closer, holding on tightly, giving in, their mouths caressed, touching gently, teasing, promising.

The warmth of his lips was a wonder.

Her entire body crackled with a sudden need and fierce longing.

In all her life, she had never known anything like this, and she had not been a prudish miss hidden away from gentlemen.

She'd known the kiss of a footman, of a stable boy, and a young Italian lord, but this was unlike anything that had ever come before. Those were shadowy echoes of what passion could be, and here in the powerful Duke of Talbot's arms, she felt afire. His hands roved her back, seizing her towards him, and suddenly she felt a ferocious need from him, as if he was clinging to her, holding her tightly, standing on the brink or darkness, ready to teeter into it. And she was the only thing keeping him from tumbling into that blackness.

It was both an overwhelming responsibility and an understanding that she had been brought into his life for a purpose, just as he had hers.

Oh, how she wanted him.

Oh, how he wanted her.

There was no question in the way their breaths met, their bodies tangled, and their kiss electrified, but then, ever so slowly, he lifted his gaze and looked down at her.

“I am here,” he said, finally answering her question, “because I am broken.”

She gasped. “You are not,” she insisted.

“Oh, but I am, Agatha,” he said. “Do not mistake me. My insides, my heart, my soul, they have been broken.”

“No,” she countered fiercely, her hands sliding up to his face, “Those things cannot break. Perhaps you think they can. Perhaps it feels as if they have, but oh, my friend, oh, Grayson,” she said, daring to use his name. “Hearts and souls? They are not made of matter the way you think. They are malleable and capable of rebuilding themselves. It is only our thoughts, our foolish, weak thoughts, which make us feel as if we are broken or trapped. I promise you that if you but give into it, you will find your heart again.”

His hands tightened on her back. “You make a promise that you cannot keep,” he stated.

“I can,” she said, daring to make the claim with every fiber of her being, every part of her soul.

“It feels frightening.”

“Life is frightening,” she countered. “You know that better than most. What has broken you then?”

“My own faith in humanity.”

“Someone betrayed you?” she asked softly.

He gave a tight shake of his head. “Not me. A friend.”

“I am so very sorry. What happened?” she urged.

His eyes closed, masking the horror rooted inside him. “I cannot tell you.”

“Not yet,” she returned.

He nodded his head. “Not yet, possibly not ever,” he said. “It’s too much. When I talk about it, it feels as if the world is going to swallow me up.”

“Then you must not let go of me for I shall not let anything happen to you,” she said.

He beamed down at her. “A brave, bold, daring promise. Again, something you cannot keep. I have already almost thrown myself in,” he whispered.

“But you didn’t,” she replied. “Is that not true?”

“It is true,” he said with a grimace.

“Now, why are you here truly?” she asked again, this time more firmly. This time determined not to be distracted by their passion, their mutual need, and whatever strange thing in the universe that had brought them together.

“Revenge,” he growled soft and low.

And in that moment, she knew that he was inviting her into his world and that she wanted to be a part of it.

“I see,” she said before deciding that she would do whatever it took to help him. For he held her heart, of that she was certain “How can I help you? How can I help you to heal your heart, to heal your soul?”

His lips curved in a slow, bittersweet smile, and he used the words that she was so familiar with. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Well, then we shall have to find a way.”

“I’m not supposed to be telling you this,” he said with a groan.

“Supposed to,” she retorted. “The most absurd words. Why should we care anything about supposed to, you and I?”

He held her tight before he stepped back. “I must go,” he said. “I will be wanted this evening by my friends, and I cannot disappoint them. You see, without them, I would not be here.”

“Then I am very grateful to them,” she replied. “And indeed, you must go.”

Her fingertips trailed through his as he slipped away.

The ache of the loss shocked her. She did not want to let him go. She did not want to ever let him go.

“If they are the reason that you are here,” she added, “they are also the reason for my happiness.”

“Oh, Agatha,” he murmured, his voice deep with passion, “I am afraid that we have set something into motion that will not end as you desire.”

“You have no idea how any of this will end,” she said. “None of us can know, so do not waste your fears on it. Go now,” she insisted. “You must go to your friends and I to my cousin and my grandma. For I must convince everyone that I am but a merry girl who is interested in a husband.”

“Are you,” he suddenly asked, “interested in a husband?”

She arched a brow at him. “Of course I am, Grayson.”

And she did not say the words, “I am interested in you,” because from the look on his face, he already knew.

He swallowed, then headed into the darkness, tracing back up the path.

She waited but a moment, then charged down her own path, heading up towards the house until she caught sight of someone sitting on a bench underneath a tree.

He had a large bottle of brandy in hand and appeared to be half drunk. The man looked exhausted, worn, his eyes twin shadows of hell.

Yes, he looked sick, his body hunched, and broken sobs were coming out of him.

She was tempted to step forward to ask him if he needed help, but she knew... Something inside her told her that he was not like the Duke of Talbot. That if she were to step out of

the darkness, he would not welcome her comfort. Instead, he would snarl at her like a dog, barking and ferocious.

“Brown,” a voice called, dark and rigid, “get back up to the house. You are wanted at the gambling table. You need to recover your funds, you great idiot.”

Brown snapped to attention and wiped his eyes swiftly. “Oh, God,” he said to himself. “Oh, God.”

And her heart sank, for she realized she was witnessing a man at war with himself, a man who was truly on the brink of feeling broken. And unlike Talbot, this was a man who would not claw back from the abyss, for he seemed to have already thrown himself in.

Though he was here in the flesh, his spirit seemed gone. The pain of it surprised her.

She whipped away.

She knew the mistake of involving herself with such people. She had seen her mother with such men. She had seen others trying to save them, but there was a distinct difference in how she helped people. She knew that they had to want to help themselves. They had to be willing to take action. But from the way that Brown drank his brandy, hunched his shoulders, and responded to the voice calling him back to the gambling tables, Brown did not want help yet. He did not believe he deserved it. Worse, he was not ready to abandon hell.

So, she would not try to lead him from that place.

No one could.

Not if he could not see even a glimmer of light.

## CHAPTER 9

*“You* have to promise me that you’re not going to kill him outright.”

The rough notes of Daniel Bedford’s London accent hissed through the gallery.

They stood together in the corner, surrounded by great works of art from years past, all the way back to the time of Raphael.

It was shadowy and the perfect place for secrets.

Bedford looked like he was taking no nonsense.

He was a man who’d seen it all, so it didn’t surprise Talbot. Still, he had not expected to be confronted on his way back out to the gardens.

In truth, he had expected everyone to allow him to behave as he always did because that had been what his friends had been doing for a year.

He’d sat in the private chamber tonight listening to them talk, intervening a few times as they all reaffirmed their vows to seek revenge and assist each other. He knew his friends were concerned that he was unhinged, that at any moment he might take a pistol or a knife and kill Brown.

And who knew... Perhaps he’d kill all the others who had hurt his friends too.

It had occurred to him that he could take them all out in one sweep, and then no one would have to suffer anymore. He could be the one who took the blame, who took the repercussions, and his friends would be freed from all pain. Yes, he’d thought about it, but he knew that such a thing would cause utter mayhem, cause more difficulty than his friends would allow, and that his friends would never be able to live with such an outcome.

So, he had managed to hold himself back.

“I’m not going to murder him in front of everyone, if that’s what you are asking,” he bit out.

Bedford rolled his eyes. “That is not what I’m saying,” he said. “I have concerns. I’ve seen the bloodlust in your eyes, but something seemed particularly off tonight as we sat up there. I came in and you looked on edge, but it wasn’t the sort of thing I’ve seen from you before. What’s going on? Was it the woman?”

Grayson tensed. “You’re the second person this evening to suggest that I can be overly influenced by a young lady of the ton.”

Bedford narrowed his eyes and folded his arms across his impressively broad chest, made strong by years in the army and by working his way up the criminal world of London. “Is it true?” he asked. “I need to know if I’m going to help in all of this.”

*Help*, Grayson wanted to mock. Bedford had orchestrated a great deal of this. Many of Bedford’s toughs were about to make certain that no one could escape the estate. People did not realize that they were in a gilded prison at this house party. No one could leave. No one could come in. It had been arranged this way months ago so that they could all have their crack at revenge.

Wildwood’s castle had been deemed the most ideal of all their estates.

It was in a beautiful, isolated area, immense, and for years, very few people had been invited to it, so they knew that all invitations would be accepted.

Who wouldn’t want the opportunity to set foot into one of the most important, gilded homes in the land?

Not a single invitation had been turned down, and Bedford had organized a great deal of how it would all come together, though no one thought they were being interfered with.



Many were being quietly manipulated.

Grayson admired Bedford for that. But the simple truth was that it was difficult to be in the same house as Brown and do nothing.

“I have met a young lady,” he allowed. “And I will not lie. She has changed the game.”

Bedford groaned. “What is it with you dukes? I thought you were all supposed to be unattainable, impossible to get, or if you were to marry, that it should be done through careful and tenuous negotiations between two families.”

Talbot let out a dry laugh. “That is usually the way of it, Bedford. You are not off the mark. Typically, dukes find their wives through vast negotiations between mothers and grandmamas, but not us. We have seen life and the vagaries of it, and it seems as if, well, fate is laughing at us. Don’t you think?”

Bedford shook his head. “I don’t follow.”

“When all we want is revenge, fate keeps handing us...”

“Ah,” Bedford said, his brows rising. “Women to remind you that life is worth living?”

“Something like that,” he hissed. “But I cannot be dissuaded from my path. As a matter of fact, I’m fairly certain that she will help me on it.”

“That sounds familiar,” Bedford said. “I don’t think you’re the only one who will be using a lady to get what they want, but are you certain that’s good for her?”

“She says she wants to help me,” he said softly.

“My God, you make quick work,” Bedford replied, his lip curling slightly.

“I can’t explain it,” Grayson rushed in, rankling at Bedford’s reaction. “It’s as if we have known each other forever and have an affinity.”

“Bloody hell,” Bedford mocked. “Is this Romeo and Juliet?”

Grayson drew in a sharp breath. “I hope not. That doesn’t end well at all, does it?”

Bedford shook his head. “No. Forgive me. I did not mean to imply that this house party would end in a bloodbath with most people dead.”

“Good, you would’ve failed at your job then, wouldn’t you?” Grayson drawled.

Bedford gave a tight nod. “There will be no failing,” he said.

“I’m glad you’re so certain, Bedford.” Grayson let out a long breath. “I, on the other hand, have some doubts. Too many things are coming into play that we could not have planned on.”

Bedford winced. “People do not like to behave by the rules set out for them.”

That was the truth, Grayson knew. Lady Agatha was a prime example. She did not want to play by rules. She wanted to make them, and he liked her for it.

“Stay out of my way, Bedford, and all will be well.”

“That is not how this is supposed to go,” Bedford reminded, undaunted. “You know that you need me. You need my information. You need my assistance, and so I will not be staying out of your way. I will be making certain that you do not cause too much trouble because I know trouble is what you’re good at, Talbot.”

Grayson gave a slight nod of acquiescence. “I will not interfere with the other dukes’ revenge, I promise you that, but I have to have mine.”

“They all feel the same way,” Bedford said with some sympathy. “You are not unique or special in this.”

“I know,” he said softly. “I know.” But the well of pain that thrummed through him? It felt unique, as if no one could ever feel such a thing. He was fairly certain that such a thought was childish.

Still, it was the truth.

“What did you see of Brown tonight?” Grayson asked at last.

Bedford paused then began recounting. “He lost thousands at the table, drank far too much, and headed out to the garden to feel sorry for himself.”

“What?” he snapped as the words hit home.

“He headed out to the garden,” Bedford said slowly, pointedly.

His heart leaped into his mouth and yet he managed, “What part of the garden?”

“The part you were in with your young lady,” Bedford growled softly.

Grayson whipped forward and grabbed Bedford by the shoulder. “You explain yourself because you were sitting on that information from the beginning of this conversation, and you will tell me exactly what you’re insinuating. What happened? Is she all right?”

Bedford looked him up and down, skepticism sharpening his gaze. “You left her out there in the dark, you know, to come to the meeting with the dukes. Did you not think about walking her back?”

He was a spy and a man of action, and he should have taken her back to the house. “I didn’t want her to be seen coming back out of the gardens with me.”

Bedford nodded, but his face was hard. “So, you left her alone in the shadows where anyone might attack her, or she might come across a man like Brown.”

His throat tightened, and the room spun for a moment. “Did she? Come across a man like Brown?”

“She came across Brown.”

“Tell me.” he said, growing suddenly ice-cold. He thought himself so clever, so superior, but since Jean Pierre’s death, he had not worked as he should. He had made so many small mistakes, none fatal or dangerous... But they scared him. And he no longer trusted himself, which was why he was no longer in Europe, no longer working for Wellington, no longer at the front of Horse Guards.

He couldn’t. He didn’t trust himself, and he would not hurt anyone.

Hence, his life of idleness now. That idleness had only intensified the grief. “Tell me she’s all right,” he growled out.

“She’s all right,” Bedford finally allowed. “Despite the fact that she went with you, she seems to be a young woman of good sense. She spotted Brown feeling rather sorry for himself on a bench with a bottle of brandy, but she lingered only for a moment, turned, and headed back up the path.”

Bedford took Grayson’s hand and removed it from his shoulder before continuing coldly, “You see, my job is to watch all of you through this little affair and not to interfere much. To make certain that you all get the revenge that you desire.” Bedford scowled and looked to the pieces of art on the walls. “That can be damn difficult, you know, because all of you poncey, toffee-nosed gentlemen are used to getting your way. The shock of pain? It has undone you. You’re not accustomed to the horrors of life. Now, you’re slightly different Talbot, for I know that you know war. You know hell. Still, do not let her be crushed under your ambition for revenge. If you are going to use her, if you are going to keep her by your side and not play by the rules, as you say, you damn well better make sure she’s safe.”

Bedford swung his gaze back and took a step towards Grayson that felt laced with warning. “Can you do that?”

Because a man like you seems very unpredictable.”

Grayson wanted to argue, but the truth was he *felt* unpredictable, as if he could turn a corner at any particular moment and not know what was going to happen next.

He'd certainly not envisioned her, or their kiss in the garden, or what was happening now.

She was right.

One could not predict the future.

He had no idea how any of this would end, but he'd be damned if he would be instrumental in her pain, in anything happening to her.

He gave a nod to Bedford. “Point taken. I will be more careful.”

“You'll stay away from her,” Bedford clarified.

Grayson narrowed his eyes. “I did not say that.”

## CHAPTER 10

Agatha's titan of a grandmama sat at her dressing table as the first rays of dawn came up.

Agatha had barely been abed, but she was an early riser. She always had been. It did not matter if she went to bed far after the clock had struck midnight. The dawn light called to her, and she felt herself to be incredibly lucky that she never felt ill for it.

She didn't understand where her energy came from, but she had heaps of it.

She was grateful, and these days Grandmama was an early riser too, no matter the state of affairs. Though Agatha knew that years ago, when Grandmama had been at the height of the ton, she had slept well after breakfast time, taking her meal in her room like married ladies were allowed to do.

But this morning, Grandmama looked strange.

She was clutching her dressing table, and her face was gray.

Agatha rushed towards her. "Grandmama, are you ill?"

"No, child. No, I am quite well," she said.

"Don't lie to me, Grandmama. Your face. It looks..."

Her grandmama turned towards her and took Agatha's hands in her suddenly frail and papery ones. "I am old, my dear," she said.

"No," Agatha started to deny, harshly, quickly.

"I am," her grandmama said firmly but gently.

And the truth was on her face and in the silvery locks of her hair and the gnarled nature of her fingers. Her age was undeniable. Her beloved grandmama's face was a papery mask of years of good living, rich choices, and adventure.

Her grandmama's face was a beloved one, the most important one, Agatha might argue. For in all her mother's tempestuous doings, Agatha's grandmama had been a constant. And her grandmama was the one who had launched Agatha into society and was now steering her towards happiness. Or so she hoped.

"My dear," she said. "I am tired this morning. I am feeling the strain of two young ladies who are throwing themselves with zest into the marriage mart."

Agatha held her grandmama's hand tightly and knelt beside her. "Grandmama, do not say such a thing. I am not—"

"You are, and I am quite pleased," her grandmama declared, brooking no argument. "I never thought that I would get to call two of my granddaughters a duchess."

"Oh, Grandmama," she sighed, though she wasn't surprised by her grandmama's predictions.

"Are you not pursuing him, my dear?" Her grandmama gave her a wink. "I saw the way you looked at him." Grandmama squeezed her hand then, a sign of approval.

"I suppose I am," Agatha admitted, relieved to share it with someone. "The moment I looked at him, I said..."

"The one," Grandmama finished for her.

"Yes, how do you know?"

"It is the way with some of us," Grandmama said. "I was very much the same when I met your grandfather, but it doesn't hit everyone. And your cousin... She's quite taken with the Duke of Wildwood. There is no denying it. They are a perfect match, I think, and I'm rather glad because that fellow who wrote to her father... Well, I don't like him. There's something odd about him. He seemed quite a good catch with his fortune and his title."

Her grandmama's face turned wary. "But no, not the one for her. And unless she suddenly decides that she is to fall in

love with Wexford, well, I would not want her to pursue it at all. Besides Wildwood shall be a much greater prize.”

“Grandmama,” she teased. “Can you think of gentlemen only as prizes?”

“They *are* prizes, my dear.” And then Grandmama leaned in. “As are you. All magnificent catches are, and you are going to catch the duke.”

“I never thought to do it,” Agatha said.

“I know, my love. I know.” Grandmama patted her on the cheek. “That makes this all the more interesting, and I think he wants you too.”

“I think he wants me as well.”

“Is that what you were doing, whisking him onto the floor, then heading out into the night later?” her grandmama asked, with a twinkle in her eye. “Now you best be careful. Gentlemen like that, well, you never know if...”

“What, Grandmama? If I kiss him, he shan’t ask me to marry him?”

Her grandmama clucked. “No, not a man like that. Half the children in the ton are born before they should be, or on the wrong side of the blanket. But I will say, make sure he is the one before you throw yourself entirely in, Agatha. I know you, and even if you had to run away to Italy because you’d been ruined, I’d prefer it to another mismatched marriage. Don’t marry him if he’s going to break your heart.”

“He’s not going to break my heart, Grandmama,” Agatha insisted.

Her grandmama grew rather serious. “I don’t know. He seems rather melancholy, and that’s not the sort of person I would have ever picked for you.”

“He was not born melancholic,” she said softly. “Life has eaten him up. Something happened to him.”



“Well,” her grandmama ventured, “his entire family never really recovered from what happened in France, my darling.”

She frowned. “What do you mean, Grandmama?”

A tired sigh slipped past her grandmother’s lips and for a moment her proud shoulders sagged as if under the weight of the world. “His mother was French, you know. He used to spend his childhoods abroad when he was small. That was until 1789, and it all went terribly, terribly wrong. Half of his family was executed, his mother’s side, in those bloody days. Aunts, uncles, cousins, family friends.”

“How terrible,” Agatha said, her throat tightening.

Her grandmama nodded, her eyes shining with unshed tears at the painful memory. “Yes. It was very terrible.”

In that moment, she realized how many friends her grandmother must have lost. How many people had been stolen from her.

“It wasn’t just family,” her grandmother said. “There were others.”

“Others? I don’t understand,” Agatha said.

“I’m glad you don’t, my dear. It was a very dark time. You were so small, but it has shaped so many of us, even men like Talbot. He was a boy, but I’m sure it must have been agonizing. Anyone who was too closely associated with the family was at risk. Even his aunt’s seamstress was executed. His tutor was eventually murdered, killed by his own political party.” A look of distaste creased her already wrinkled face. “That’s what happens in those sorts of things. That sort of cruelty becomes a devouring beast, and all are laid to waste.”

“Do you not ever think revolution is the answer, Grandmama?”

Her grandmama paused. “It is easy to wave a flag and cheer for victory, but the truth is so many die that cannot be brought back.” She swallowed. “But I do not have a true answer for you, my darling. I am not that wise.”

Grandmama's eyes turned to the window as if she could see beyond a veil there to all the souls who had been stolen away. "If only we could find a way to sort it out, to stop our natures," she rasped.

"Our natures, Grandmama?"

"Oh, you know about our natures, my dear," her grandmama said, wiping at her eyes and blinking rapidly. "You saw your mother destroy all which was good so often. Now, what I love about you and myself and your darling cousin is that we love and value life, and we shall not be foolish and waste it."

"That's exactly true, Grandmama," she affirmed, longing to soothe her sorrow.

"And I?" Her grandmama gave a quick smile as if closing the door on her pain. "I am merely happy that I wake up every day. It is quite a gift, you know."

Agatha laughed, though she did not feel like laughing.

The very idea that her grandmama might not wake up one day was horrifying.

She felt like her grandmama was a titan, someone who would stand forever, timeless, immortal. The idea that one day she would slip out of this world, her body returning to the earth? Her soul going, she knew not where. Perhaps to heaven, perhaps to the world about her, but always remaining in her heart? She did not wish to think on it, and so she forced a smile.

"What are we to do today?"

Grandmama smiled and leaned back, her rich dressing gown glimmering in the early light. "Oh, so many things. I plan on putting your cousin in Wildwood's way as often as possible. But I do not think I shall need to help you get in the way of the Duke of Talbot, shall I?"

She wagged her brows, determined to lift her grandmother's spirits. "I do not think so either, Grandmama. I

know my way about such a thing.”

“Good.” And then her grandmama leaned forward and took both Agatha’s hands in her own. “If you want him, go and get him, my dear. He is yours for the catching.”

She nodded and kissed her grandmama’s knuckles.

As her grandmama drew breath and pulled the bell pull next to her dressing table for her morning coffee to be sent up, she continued. “I will tell you that I do think something odd is afoot in this house. I don’t want your cousin to know, and I don’t want you to worry about it overly.”

“Oh, I agree, Grandmama,” she said swiftly, standing. “There is *definitely* something afoot in this house. It’s all too convenient, is it not?”

“What is?” her grandmama asked as she began smoothing her hands and face with cream.

“Five dukes?” she pointed out. “All together at this house party? All handsome, all marriageable? It is too...”

“Too lovely,” Grandmama agreed with a knowing look. “Yes, you are correct. Sometimes, it is wonderful to accept glorious things. Sometimes, if something does appear too good, it *is* not good. So, one must be on their guard.” She slipped on an emerald ring and then one with a large diamond surrounded by sapphires. “Yes, we shall have to be very careful as we move forward.”

Agatha hesitated. “Grandmama, do you know a man named Brown?”

Her grandmama narrowed her eyes. “Who?”

“Fairly young. Perhaps thirty. Dark hair...”

“Oh dear,” her grandmama exclaimed as she turned towards her. “You do seem to be finding the melancholy ones. You are not interested in him? Pray tell me you are not.”

“No, I am not, Grandmama,” she assured.

“Good.” Her grandmama shook her silvery head. “He is not for you. He started out a very promising young man, but things have gone terribly awry. Gambling debts, drinking, talk of women. I do not know why he was invited to this house party at all. The last I heard, he’d made a muck of his career in France and had been recalled. Yes, that one shall be lucky to make it to old age, I think, if he doesn’t drown himself in a bottle or lose himself in a duel.”

“Oh, Grandmama,” she mused. “It is so sad the way so many throw themselves away.”

“Not you,” her grandmama said suddenly, taking her by the chin and looking deep into her eyes. “You shall never throw yourself away, not like...”

Agatha knew the words that her grandmama stopped herself from saying.

Not like her mother.

Her mother had had a chance at happiness. So many of them actually.

But it was as if her mother could not bear happiness, as if she did not think she deserved it, which was so very strange because Grandmama had loved her dearly. Agatha knew it, and she had loved her mother dearly.

But in the end, the thing that had been true and clear was that her mother had not loved herself, and that was the greatest thing in the world.

So she leaned forward, hugged her Grandmama, and said, “Thank you so very much for teaching me to love myself.”

“Oh, my darling girl, it is my greatest wish that you should love yourself, for that is the most important thing.” Tears filled her eyes again. But they were ones of joy. And hope. “I have failed at so many things, but if I can succeed in that, I will be a very happy old woman.”

## CHAPTER II

*T*rue to his fears with Bedford, Grayson had not been able to stay away from Agatha.

They had spent every secret moment together at this house party, like two objects drawn together by an unforeseeable force and unable to fight it.

They had witnessed the shenanigans of the hunt, the boating party, and the toppling of people into the water, and frankly, Grayson had not ever had a better companion to witness such things with than her.

Still, his heart pounded wildly in his chest as he thundered down the hallway.

Things were in motion now that could not be stopped.

Brown was getting worse every day, just as he was supposed to, and Grayson had already decided that he was going to make certain that Brown did not see the light of day at the end of this house party.

He merely needed to make certain that the fellow drove himself further and further into disarray, and then no one would be surprised if he was found, say, in the lake or in a trench, his horse having unseated him.

He'd never contemplated direct murder before.

He was a cloak and dagger man and had killed people on the battlefield.

This felt different, but it didn't feel wrong because, after all, someone had to make Brown pay for Jean Pierre's death. And so far, no one in England had been willing to do it.

Oh, Brown had been recalled, of course, brought home because he was considered to be too much of a risk with his drinking and his gambling.

Other men had fallen after Jean Pierre.

Grayson had found that out at Horse Guards, but it had not been enough. After all, Brown was from an important family. They couldn't put him in prison. All they could do was hush it up, keep it quiet, but he didn't want to be quiet about it. He wanted to scream and rail, but he could not.

If it was possible to believe, Brown's father was even more powerful than he was, sitting on the king's cabinet. And he was close friends with the prime minister.

And so, Grayson had been prevented from bringing the man to true justice. Another kind of justice would have to do. And as he slipped into the library, he was not surprised to find Agatha there.

Wherever he went, she was, and wherever she went, he was. They had not intended it, or at least he did not think that she had the ability to foresee where he would go, but they both circled each other like a moon and stars and planets, all in order in the universe.

And as he crossed further into the dark library lit only by a fire, he found himself whispering to her, "What are you doing?"

She whipped around, eyes wide, and then when she spotted him, she let out a relieved laugh. "Good God, that was terrifying. Don't do that again. You are far too good at it."

"What?" he asked. "Sneaking up on people."

He wanted to tell her that it was his profession, but that felt like an admission that he could not yet yield to her.

But how long could he go without telling her the true nature of himself? Certainly not much longer, unless he was going to shove her from him, and he could no more do that than he could tear off his arm.

It seemed wild to admit such a thing. But there it was.

"What are you reading?" he asked.

She was clutching two volumes to her chest as if they were treasure. “Alexander Pope.”

“Pope?” he said. “Truly?”

She cleared her throat. “Yes, and John Donne.”

And he noticed the other volume in her other hand. “Good God, woman. You are reading the metaphysical poets.”

She scowled playfully. “I told you that I’m interested in philosophy. Most people think I’m only interested in penny novelettes and the rather salacious adventures of novels, which I am. My cousin happily hands them to me all the time. I read them, and they give me a great deal of pleasure, but...”

“But what?” he asked softly, crossing to her, taking one of the volumes and slipping it between his own fingers.

It was warm from her body, and it felt like an intimate caress from her as he held it to his broad chest.

He lifted it to his face, the cover of the book. He could not stop himself. He pressed the leather to his cheek and felt the warmth there. It was as if he was absorbing her, her emotions, her thoughts, her conflicts, and the work that she was so enamored with.

She studied his reverence for the book and murmured, “Most people think that I’m just a silly piece, but I care so much more about this world and its workings. I don’t see the need to convince people that I’m an intellect,” she added. “I’m glad they think I’m frothy and that I’m fun. And my cousin has known enough hardships. She doesn’t need to know that I secretly contemplate the origins of the universe.”

“How shocking,” he teased, adoring her nature, her kindness, the breadth of her abilities. “That you question the origins of the universe.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “I read science, and I’m certain that you do too.”

He laughed at that. “Of course I do. It’s interesting. I think that the future holds many discoveries.”

“Yes,” she said. “Not all of them good. Have you read Mary Shelley’s book, *Frankenstein*?”

“Of course I have,” he said. “A shocking piece of literature.”

“Yes,” she agreed with a frown. “Can you imagine using electricity to bring bits and pieces of a man back to life? How horrible for him, that poor thing.”

“Yes, Dr. Frankenstein—”

“Not Dr. Frankenstein,” she cut in quite passionately, and he stilled.

“Not Dr. Frankenstein?” he echoed.

“That fool,” she huffed.

“I see,” he said, and then he realized that she was not like the rest of humanity. She was of his bent. “You do not think that Dr. Frankenstein is the hero? You do not think the monster...is the monster, do you?”

“Correct,” she agreed solemnly. “Dr. Frankenstein is. He is the one who abandons his creature, the thing that he made, an innocent, and leaves it to a cruel, cruel world to be tortured and hurt. Of course, Dr. Frankenstein is the monster.”

“And the creation,” queried Grayson, wondering what she would say, “when he does terrible things?”

She drew herself up and said firmly, “It’s because he has been taught to do them, and he’s retaliating against those who have hurt him without cause.”

“Ah,” he began softly, feeling she might understand him better than he ever could have dared to hope. “And when one is hurt, is it acceptable to retaliate?”

They were venturing onto dangerous ground now. For these were the nuances of philosophy and morality that could not be navigated easily and without casualty.

Her eyes darkened. “I don’t know if it is,” she said. “But it’s understandable. Vengeance is a very dangerous thing, I



think”

“Is it?” he queried softly.

She nodded, holding her book closed as if it were armor against the arrows of the world. “All literature seems to suggest that vengeance mars one as much as the other. The truth is, I think it’s safe to say that if one goes after vengeance, one might as well dig two graves. It is a sentiment that I have read about, and I feel it suits.”

“Dig two graves?” he echoed.

“Yes, have you not heard of this before?” she asked, her face ghostly pale in the shadowy light.

“No, it seems interesting to me.” In that moment, he felt guarded. Would she judge him? Abandon him if she knew? And given this line of conversation and how she seemed to understand him...

“Have you guessed?” he asked suddenly.

“Guessed?” she queried, her brow furrowing.

“Yes. Do you know?” he challenged. He wouldn’t put it past her, with her intellect and observation. Had she caught him staring at Brown like he wished to take him apart? Or noticed the way the dukes were targeting specific people?

She blinked rapidly. “I don’t understand. I know a great many things, but not what you speak of. Have I upset you?”

“Yes,” he said tightly. “You have no idea what you’re talking about when you judge vengeance. What has happened to you, in your gilded life, that could possibly make you want to seek vengeance?”

Her mouth tightened, but she did not withdraw. Oh no, she took a step forward.

“Perhaps I have not seen suffering like you have, but I have not had an entirely pleasant life, Grayson,” she warned. “And right now, I do not wish for you to treat me as if it has all been fluff and nonsense. Perhaps you know a bit about me. My

life has been played out in the scandal sheets, but you do not know what it was like every day as a child. So, do not judge *me* now and think I know nothing of sorrow or pain or suffering.”

A wave of regret coursed through him.

It was the first time they had experienced animosity in their perfection together, and he was appalled at his own cruelty.

“Forgive me,” he said. “You’re right. I don’t know anything about you as a child, and you don’t know anything about...”

“What?” she prompted, reaching out to him. “Tell me, and then I will know, and then you will find out if I have judged harshly or if I’m mistaken. And I will be able to tell you then what I truly think of revenge.”

He shook his head. “No.”

“When I was five years old,” she said softly, her voice shaking with emotion, “I came down with a terrible fever. My mother was to go to the opera, and I thought surely she would stay home. Surely, she would! But she was going to meet the composer of the opera, you see. Someone she was having a liaison with, which I learned about later, and she could not bear to be separated from him. For it was the first flush of love.” She tried to smile, but it was a pained grimace. “And she chose the composer over me.”

Her eyes narrowed and her grip tightened on the book, as if books were the only thing true in the world. The only thing she truly trusted. “Two weeks later, she would not speak to him again. And she had left me...for a man she’d forget a month later. She refused to admit him into the house. But I never forgot that I hung on death’s door when I was but five years old. The nurses were quite frightened. A doctor stayed all night long and my beautiful, charming mother listened to music and watched ballet dancers prance across the stage instead of staying home with me.”

Her eyes shone with sorrow as she drew in a ragged breath. “She loved me in her way, but never tell me that my life was free of suffering. I knew I was worth very little to her in the end, even if she did love me.”

Those words cut through him, and he gently took the books and placed them down on the table beside her.

He drew her into his arms, longing to take the fear of that small child away. For he had known safety and love as a child and had never been left alone like that.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I have been selfish like a child, thinking only of myself. I see the light inside you, and so I assume there has never been any darkness there, but it is the darkness which makes you shine brighter, isn’t it? It illuminates the beauty, the light, the glow.”

“You speak of it very poetically,” she said with a half laugh.

“Because pain is poetic,” he said.

“No,” she said tightly, wrapping her arms about him, holding fast. “It is not. We must not glamorize or glorify pain. It is a part of our existence, it is a part of humanity, but my darling duke,” she said softly. “You must not fall in love with pain. It is a terrible taskmaster. I have seen the way it can take someone down. You must not yield to it.”

He desperately wished to follow her advice, but Grayson feared it was too late.

## CHAPTER 12

The wagering was flying high.

Agatha absolutely loved it. She adored tennis, and the opportunity to play against the Duke of Talbot seemed like the perfect celebration of a beautiful day.

The colors of a delicious English summer had come to the Duke of Wildwood's estate, and everyone seemed in a delightful mood and eager to frolic.

There was, she knew, an undercurrent that could not quite be seen, much like a cake that had marzipan on top with beautiful decorations but which had not been fully cooked inside.

Still, she was not going to bother with things she did not totally understand right now. No. She was here to have fun. To enjoy and celebrate all that life offered her.

She balanced her racket easily in her hand, glanced over at the Duke of Talbot, and winked at him.

“Are you ready to be decimated, Your Grace?”

The Duke of Talbot threw back his head, his thick mane dancing in the sun, and laughed. “Indeed, I am!”

They had agreed that they would show friendship, merriment, and an air of nonchalance.

Talbot had been concerned, he had told her, that he was acting far too melancholic in company. He did not wish people to feel concerned for him, and she was proud of him, happy for him, that he took note of it and wished to do something about it. And of course, she was delighted to step in to assist him in improving his feelings.

Playing sports was one of the best ways to do it.

Next, she was going to convince him to go on a long walk with her. In her estimation, the outdoors and exercise were the best things for a melancholic attitude, and he seemed to be improving by leaps and bounds with her at his side.

Next, she was going to lure him into the woods in the evening, and find a folly, and see if she could get him to kiss her again.

But this moment, the present moment, as always, was more important than all the others. Agatha dearly loved the fact that they were no longer hiding away and that their friendship was now becoming more on view.

The tennis court was a groomed field court.

She had been watching tennis since she was a small girl. In fact, she had been deeply inspired by Madame Masson, one of the most famous tennis players to have ever lived. Madame Masson loved to dress *a la grecque* in pantaloons and a short skirt.

What a wondrous woman she had been to watch dash about, bashing the ball, getting it to strike exactly where she wanted, and defeating any opponent who came at her. Yes, Madame had been famous for beating almost any man who had dared challenge her.

And so Agatha's mother had gotten her lessons when she'd been quite small, to make certain that she had good stamina for all her dances, so she could carry on through the evening from sundown until the first rays of the sun were kissing the sky. Tennis was the perfect way to become an excellent, strong dancer, and she had the ability to bounce back and forth quickly across a court and bang a ball better than any of the other ladies. Or gentlemen, for that matter.

She felt a wave of eager anticipation for the bout.

Grayson had shed his dark coat and was standing in his taut breaches, which covered his beautifully muscled thighs. His perfectly polished boots gleamed. His linen shirt skimmed his hard shoulders, and she adored every inch of him.

She had to make certain that his physical perfection was not a distraction. No, she could not allow the idea of their mutual pleasure to steal this moment of glorious victory away.

For this morning over breakfast, someone had insinuated that no lady could play tennis!

She had countered the argument, and the Duke of Talbot had challenged her to a game of tennis with mischief in his gaze. Bless him.

She knew Grayson, though most would try to argue such a thing was not possible in but a few days.

But she did. The heavens were on her side in this. It was written in her soul, his destiny to be with her.

He would never set her up for humiliation in front of anyone. He had recognized that she would never offer to show how capable she was if she was in fact incapable. And so, his challenge clearly meant to show her off, not take her down.

She adored it about him, the way he saw her, the way he was eager to make everyone see her, or so it seemed.

She only hoped to do the same for him, but moreover, to help him see himself. For she was fairly certain that he did not. He was not at all familiar with himself. He was convinced that he was a dark, gothic hero caught up in the novels of the past century, a beast lurking in a castle. But that was not Talbot, even if he wished the world to think so.

No, he was too much an idealist, too full of heart to be monstrous.

So, as she balanced from foot to foot, holding her racket, she gave him a grin. "Begin!" she called.

"As you will," he said with a flourishing bow, using his racket as if it were a tricorne hat from the previous century.

The crowd gave up a cheer, for they had come by the dozens to line the court.

Coin was being exchanged, and betting books were kept. She absolutely adored it. For what was more popular in England amongst her set than a good sports match like boxing or fencing or tennis combined with gambling?

It was the favorite habit of the elite, for they did love to spend their coin on such things and feel the excitement that came from the possibility of winning in the face of defeat.

Talbot picked up the ball.

A collective gasp of excitement came from the crowd dressed in beautiful summer linens and bright, joyful colors.

Grayson lobbed it towards her, and she began to dash easily. Quickly, they bandied the ball back and forth using the field smoothly. Within moments, she had scored her first point, the ball dancing past Talbot's racket.

He let out a curse, but then grinned. "Well done," he called. "Well done, my Lady Agatha."

She gave a bow of her own, this time more in the male fashion than the female one. She only wished that she could have dressed a la grecque as Madame Masson had done. It was a much more sensible form, but her skirts were loose and skimmed her ankles, not the ground. She'd hitched them up to one side to help her race about.

Thank goodness she owned sensible shoes for such endeavors too. Slippers would have fallen right off, though it might have been the height of hilarity, and certainly the height of gossip, if she had ended up dancing about the court in her stockinged feet.

She already had enough intriguing stories about her to do such a thing.

Talbot twisted his racket, twirling it in the air, and gave a nod as he waited for her to serve.

Which she did with aplomb!

Off they went again, rushing across the outdoor court. The ball went back and forth wildly over the net. And then, dash it

all, Talbot got a ball past her!

The crowd was cheering loudly for both of them. Clearly, two camps were emerging. But all in good fun.

Much to Grayson's credit, he did not give out a cry of triumph, nor did she show great signs of defeat, for she would not be seen as a poor loser.

Grayson gave a mere incline of his head, his hair boyishly teasing his brow, and backed up.

The bookkeeper was scribbling furiously.

Apparently, odds were increasing. More bets were coming in. And then she noticed out of the corner of her eye that Brown was there, a silver flask in hand, and he was making comment into the bookkeeper's ear.

Apparently, Talbot spotted it too.

Grayson's brow furrowed, his eyes narrowed, and the delighted look on his face dimmed. She smiled at him, catching his gaze, hoping to lift him up. What was it between them? There was something there for certain, for the mere sight of Brown caused the Duke of Talbot pain.

Indeed, it struck her then that she knew him better than enough. She knew him better than any, she thought. From almost the moment of their meeting, she'd seen she was an extension of him in many ways, and he her, and she could see on his face that the presence of Mr. Brown was like a wound.

His shoulders squared back, his face went hard, and her attempts to lift him with her own visage failed.

He struck the ball hard towards her. She struck it hard back. They raced up and down to various points of the court. Her breath came in sharp intakes now. He was playing hard, in earnest, giving her no mercy.

The crowd seemed to think it quite exciting and brilliant to watch the two of them heave with breath and vaulting about, their bodies twisting under the morning sun.



But she would not be defeated. And so, when she lobbed the ball back with a grunt, striking it forcefully, Talbot leapt to the side, but he missed within an inch.

Brown's eyes lit with pleasure, and she realized as she glanced back at the crowd, that Brown had bet on her. He had chosen the one most would assume would lose.

The moment she saw Brown's wish, she considered losing on purpose. She did not wish to add to Talbot's grievance, but she could not do such a thing. For all her worth, she'd never played to lose, and she never would. She couldn't. It wasn't her nature.

And so when Grayson stood back up, dusting himself off, she lifted her chin and winked at him, desperate to try to turn him. To turn the whole state of affairs. To move this back to the light, frothy fun that it was meant to be, or at least so she had thought.

But suddenly she wondered, had this game always been what she thought it was? Or was it something darker? Had this always been just a game between them or was there more at work here?

It unsettled her, her uncertainty around Grayson's motives.

Talbot took his stance, the playfulness largely gone now. He fairly crackled with energy. Would she be able to defeat him? Yes, she would. She would use this feeling inside him against him. Not to hurt him, but to show him that such reactions would never truly aid one in this life.

Back and forth they went again and again until finally match point was ready to be called. He struck the ball so hard into the far corner that she almost did not make it. She threw herself forward, hit the ball, and it danced back to him so unexpectedly and so out of his range that even though he threw himself to the ground to get it, he missed.

The crowd went up with cheers, everyone crying out her name. She was to be the delight of all as she always seemed to be.

The one who never lost, the one who always smiled, the one who was always triumphant, no matter the scandals lurking just around the corner.

Talbot stood, his face creased with sweat and dirt. He gave her a strange look, but then he crossed to her, took her hand in his, pressed a kiss to the top of it, and gave her a deep bow.

“Congratulations, Lady Agatha. It is well won. I would not want to go up against you in a war.”

“Thank goodness,” she declared merrily, though there was a depth of emotion to her words that she had not expected, “that we are not fighting.”

His eyes narrowed ever so slightly, and she felt a moment’s unease.

Were they fighting? She did not think so. They had always been of an accord, and surely they always would be.

But then his gaze swung to Brown.

Brown, whose face had lit for a moment, and then the pleasure seemed to disappear from his once handsome face. Brown’s eyes traveled to the Duke of Talbot, and the look between those men was fleeting and strange. Brown gave a shudder, but Talbot was unreadable, unmovable, and then suddenly he smiled.

But it was a forced smile.

Grayson inclined his head toward Brown. “Congratulations, sir, if you bet on the lady.”

Brown gave an inclination of his own head. He said nothing though and lifted his flask. Then he turned and melted into the crowd.

And all Agatha’s feelings of hope began to melt away too.

Something was truly wrong. And she was going to find out what.

## CHAPTER 13

*A*s the sun set over the Wildwood estate, Grayson charged out into the vast woods. He was not in the habit of using good people, not truly. As a coordinator of spies at war, he had, of course, had to manipulate people.

He had had to lie to people. But right now, he felt a conflict within him building that was intense and immovable. What was he doing with Agatha? His heart called out for her, there was no question. But his mind and his instincts were maneuvering him down a path that seemed untenable.

This morning at breakfast, he had spotted Brown looking rather avaricious at the idea of a bet between the two of them, and so he had agreed to the tennis match with zeal.

What a fool he'd been!

Why would he do such a thing? He could hurt Agatha, but he wanted to hurt Brown. He truly did.

He wanted to shove him further and further down the path, but he had not expected Brown to bet on Agatha. Most arrogant men would never do such a thing. They would always choose the larger, physically more capable man in such a thing. And so Brown had not lost, nor had he lost face.

Grayson swallowed back the bile growing inside him and strode down the root-strewn path into the thick woods. He spotted a folly in the distance and turned away from it.

He did not wish to come into contact with any lovers tonight. Undoubtedly, there would be lovers in such a place. Such a thing was a beacon for them. Perhaps even one of his fellow dukes, who were falling head over in heels for the ladies they kept running into, would be in one.

It was absurd.

Revenge. That's why they were here.

Revenge. Not love. And yet love seemed to be popping up everywhere. It was driving him positively mad. He wanted to crush Brown. But when he had looked at Agatha, the way she kept trying to bolster his spirits and lift him up during the match, it was breaking him.

Perhaps he should tell her to go to the devil, to shove her aside, to refuse any of her assistance. After all, Bedford had warned him how difficult this could be, how dangerous, how he might hurt her. But he could not retreat now. It was too late.

Nor did he wish to. Not truly.

But he had not seen her since her winning the match this morning. He did not wish to see her right now. He was trying to draw his thoughts together. And yet, he could not ignore the crack of a branch behind him.

He whipped back towards it. “Following me, are you?”

She stopped in the shadows and ventured a chagrined smile. “Well, I suppose so, yes.” She smoothed her hands down the front of her gown. “I’m worried about you. I had no idea I would annoy you so very much by beating you. I didn’t think you were that sort of gentleman.”

He sighed, hating the fact he’d left her with such a feeling when he had not intended such a thing at all. “Come on then, Agatha. Let’s find a good spot.”

“A good spot for what?” she queried, her brows rising and her eyes twinkling.

How did she do that? And why? She had every reason to be annoyed with him, and yet she was being merry.

And suddenly, he wondered how often she chose to be merry in the sight of adversity, in difficulty, when someone she cared about was being unkind.

He thought of what she had described of her childhood. And he suddenly realized that her merriment was a direct defiance, a tool, a coping skill that she had developed to wield in the face of her uncertain childhood.

And now she was using it with him. He silently cursed himself. He was letting her down, but he had not come here for her. He had come here for himself and for his dear friend, Jean Pierre, who he could not forget.

She rushed forward, relieved that he was not sending her away, and he held out his hand. "Come, Agatha," he urged.

She slipped her hand into his and he led her farther and farther, deep into the old forest. A forest that had stood for thousands of years.

Its ancient presence was hard to conceive of. And for an instant, he felt very small, his world terribly unimportant, in the face of such an ancient collection of roots and limbs that extended back over the millennia.

Here, now, far from the house and follies, he wasn't concerned about them being caught.

And of course, she didn't seem to care. If he had to, he supposed he could marry her. It would be no difficult thing.

Marry her. The thought shook through him and landed with more welcome than he ever could have imagined.

In fact, it felt...right.

Even if it was not in ideal circumstances, they could marry.

After all, he could simply return to France once Brown was dead. Surely, after his revenge was complete, he'd be good at his work again. He could leave her in England to do whatever she wished. She'd be a magnificent duchess.

He stopped in a large copse of oak trees. Trees which seemed to have decided to grow together, entwining their branches, supporting each other like old friends.

Grayson turned to her. Moonlight was beginning to slide through the trees' branches. "Why did you follow me?" he asked. "You should not have done so."

She frowned, her gaze searching over his face. "Did you truly wish to be alone?"

“Yes,” he said honestly.

“Why?” she queried.

“Because I am trying to decide what to do with you,” he stated.

“I beg your pardon?” she piped with surprising passion. “You do not have the right to do anything with me. You are not my father. You are not my husband.”

“No, I am not,” he agreed. “But you seem determined to be by my side and to make certain that I am all right, even when I do not wish it.”

She flinched. “You do not wish me here at this moment?”

He cursed under his breath. Again. He felt at such peace with her, such affinity, yet due to the affair with Brown, there was a discordant note lurking. “Agatha, I cannot explain why. But you and I both understand that you are meant to be with me here, and yet I wish you to get out of my way too. I have things that I need to do, and you mustn’t interfere.”

“I thought I was helping you,” she pointed out. “That is what you wished, was it not? But I cannot help you if you do not truly tell me what is going on. What is between you and Brown?”

He looked away, letting his gaze drink in the dark shadows about them. “This is exactly what I am referring to, Agatha. You want to be involved in things that you simply cannot understand. Can you not be my friend without prying?”

“I suppose I could,” she allowed tensely. “But I do not think I would be a very good friend at all if I did. You seem bent on something.” She blew out a harsh breath. “The way you transformed today during the tennis match. One moment, playful and happy. The next moment, you looked as if you could murder someone with that racket—”

“I could have done,” he cut in.

“Perhaps no one else saw, but you didn’t hide it.”

He ground his teeth. “That is a failing on my part. I used to be able to hide whatever I felt easily. Charm, smiles, all of it, but I have lost that ability now.”

“Why would you need it?” she asked.

“Oh, Agatha,” he countered gently, bringing his gaze back to her dear face. “You do it all the time.”

She blinked, jerking her chin back as if his words caused her distress. “What are you speaking of?”

He shouldn’t say it. He should hold back, but the words spilled out of him. “Your charm, your smiles, your merriment, whenever anything is in disarray, you make people feel better. You do it in countless ways. And that is wonderful...but it is also a shield.”

She drew up. “That is not true,” she protested. “My joy at life is genuine.”

He lifted his hand and gently cupped her cheek, even though she remained tense. “Perhaps that is so, but surely you are not happy all of the time, Agatha.”

“I am happy most of the time,” she pronounced, not quite pulling back from his touch but not giving into it either. “And when I feel sorrow and deep dismay at the world, I allow it for a moment, and then I realize that there’s little I can do. So, all I can do is change my feelings. I can either live in misery or try to enjoy the world at large.”

“It is a noble thing, your detachment from emotion,” he breathed as he stroked his thumb along her delicate jaw and teased. “Perhaps you should go and be a monk.”

She winced, finding no humor at his words. “I, a monk? With the way I dress, the food that I eat, and the dances I do? I do not think that is a kind thing to say, Grayson.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You are right. I am off balance and striking out unfairly.”

She lifted her hand to his and drew his fingers from her face. “What is between you and Brown?”

He tensed as his heart began to beat faster than he liked. “He did something. Something which hurt a friend of mine very badly.”

“I’m so sorry to hear it,” she said, her face softening immediately.

And he hated that.

He hated that he could say such words and immediately she would abandon her ire and try to comfort him.

“Damn it, Agatha,” he cursed. “Stand up for yourself. I treated you appallingly after the tennis match. And when I just said you should be a monk. Tell me so.”

“All right then,” she said with a shrug, her eyes glittering with intensity. “You treated me appallingly,” she said. “Don’t do it again.”

He gave a nod, easing a bit. “Good. I’m glad you said that to me. You don’t need to treat me like I’m glass.”

“I don’t know,” she observed, twining their fingers. “You act like you are glass. One wrong word and you shall break from your good humor.”

He let out a dark laugh. “Oh God, I suppose I do, don’t I?”

She nodded. “Mercurial people are all very well and good in novels,” she said, “but they aren’t very good in life, and I think you should know it.”

He snorted. “Mercurial, am I?”

“Yes,” she confirmed with an arched brow. “Like out of a gothic novel, and I don’t have time for it. Let all of that slip away.”

He coughed “I beg your pardon?”

An unyielding wisdom crossed her face. “Whatever is happening, you must simply choose to leave it in the past.”

“I can’t leave it the past,” he growled softly. “My friend died. Brown was responsible.”



“Oh, no. How terrible,” she breathed. “Surely, he should be jailed. Why is he free?”

“Because this world is a complicated one. Because his father is very powerful. Because...justice is often elusive.”

“Oh,” she said, her eyes darkening with sympathy. “Forgive my innocence.”

“Agatha,” he replied, longing to take her into his arms. “There’s nothing to forgive, but you wish to force me to behave in certain ways without understanding why I’ve been made the way I am.”

“First, you will not tell me. And secondly, that is an excuse,” she countered quickly. “Excuses of suffering and pain allow the worst sorts of behavior,” she pointed out. “There really is no justification for it.”

“Is there not?” he queried, his insides twisting.

“Do not practice unkindness. It will not fall back upon you well.”

“Forgive. That’s what you’re really telling me, isn’t it?” he demanded. “Save myself? Don’t condemn Brown lest I condemn myself?”

“Perhaps,” she mused. “And perhaps you shouldn’t be...condemning Brown. He seems a most troubled soul.”

“He should be for what he did,” he gritted.

“Grayson,” she began and lifted her hand to his face, “I am sorry for the pain and suffering inside you. I would like to take it all away.”

“You can’t,” he returned. Her touch was soothing, but the pain inside him was deep. “Perhaps we can make it go away for a moment, but then...”

“Then let us make it go away for a moment,” she breathed.

“Why are you willing to sacrifice so much of yourself for me?” he asked, caught up in wonder and fear. Wonder at her beauty and kindness, and fear that he would misuse it.

“I’m not sacrificing any part of myself for you,” she declared. “Do not be a fool, and do not think so highly of yourself. I like you,” she said. “I like being with you. You’re not like the others. You’re honest. Well, most of the time. You do not try to hide your feelings, and even if they’re dark and deep, you express them. And I want to show you that as soon as you’ve expressed them, you can let them go and choose something different. Otherwise, it’s going to ruin you.”

“What if I don’t care if I’m ruined?” he whispered.

“Then you are a selfish, selfish soul,” she stated with little mercy.

He balked at that. Selfish? He had spent his entire life doing the best he could for others. The idea that he was selfish did not sit well at all.

“You are a very daring creature,” he finally replied.

“Thank you,” she said boldly. Then she instructed, “Now, kiss me.”

“Kiss you?” he queried, stunned.

“That will make it all go away for a moment, won’t it?”

His body quaked with desire then at the idea of making it all go away for an instant using the pleasure of her body, the pleasure that could be stoked between them. “Yes, but that is a very dangerous path to take.”

“How do you mean?” she countered, tilting her head back, her curls dancing across her neck.

“Kissing, drinking, gambling away our difficulties? It is dangerous,” he explained, even as he felt all his protests slipping away. “I could become obsessed.”

“With me?” she queried, her eyes widening.

He laughed slowly, softly. “Oh yes, Agatha. I could become obsessed with you easily.”

“Surely that would not be such a very terrible thing.”

“I don’t know,” he lamented. “I don’t know. Obsession? It never ends well.”

“I can’t agree,” she said firmly.

His arms slid around her, even as a part of him insisted he back away, slip into the woods, and leave her entirely. “Explain to me why you can’t agree.”

She cleared her throat as she pressed her body against his, the heat and warmth and welcome of her clear. “There are things that are good, things that are meant to make us happy. Those are things that we should be obsessed with, even addicted to. For they only improve our lives. It is when we choose the darkness and become addicted to that, that is where the difficulty lies.”

It was a view he’d never heard. He’d always been led by the Stoic belief in moderation. But what if... What if he was obsessed by what was good for him? It rather boggled the mind, the potential outcome of it. Would it eventually take him down a dark path? Or lead only to good, since he was obsessed only with good?

But could he choose that? He was so used to his sorrow now.

He gazed down into her eyes. “If only you could be in charge of the world.”

“I would run it very well,” she agreed, “but I haven’t the patience for such organization, so I shall run my life instead.”

“And mine?” he drawled, teasing.

“No, I will never be able to actually run it,” she said softly. “But I do hope to help you see what you’re capable of and how much awaits you if you can abandon all this darkness.”

He swallowed at her passionate words. “I’m afraid for you,” he said softly.

“Why?” she asked, genuinely surprised.

“You are hanging far too much on my recuperation.”

“It matters,” she ground out.

“My recuperation?”

“Yes.”

And a thought took root in him then. She’d never been able to save those who were meant to guide her when she was a child from themselves before her grandmother stepped in as her guardian.

Was she going to try to save him? He feared it was a fool’s errand. Was she always trying to save those on the brink?

No. She was kind. She was strong. She saw the world for its beauty, not its pain. But she did not try to save everyone.

But she had decided to save him.

“Agatha, please stop,” he begged raggedly.

“I don’t want to stop,” she insisted. “You are mine, and I will not abandon what is mine.”

The phrase traveled through him. He could not tell if it was a blessing or a curse, but it ignited his blood, and he encircled her in a tight embrace.

There was no point in arguing with her. He could see that. All he could do was give in.

So, give in, he did.

He lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her fervently. His hands roved over her body as he all but crushed her to his own form, as if he could somehow make them one and unite the heat of their bodies.

Driven by a need to have her, to mark her as his own, he guided her back to one of the oak trees and carefully pressed her against it. He dragged her skirts up her legs exposing the ribbons that tied her stockings in place. Then, gently, he teased his fingers into her hot, welcoming folds.

She gasped against his mouth but did not resist. No, she arched towards him and deepened their kiss, angling her head

and her hips to take both his mouth and his touch.

Caught up in the beauty of how she made him feel, he coaxed her body to higher and higher flights of bliss until she tensed and she trembled as wave after wave of pleasure traveled through her body and he felt triumph at giving her such release.

Obsession? Oh yes. There was no question that he was now obsessed with her.

Even now, after her release, he kissed her over and over, tasting her lips, touching his tongue to hers, and then he lifted his gaze, staring down at her impassioned face. It was soft and warm and full of comfort and, bloody hell, it looked like love.

He wanted to throw it all away then, to throw his revenge away. Everything he'd been working for. He wanted to take her hand and run. Run deep into the forest and leave Wildwood's estate and forget it all.

But he knew when the sunlight came that he would remember the bitter pain of Jean Pierre. He could not escape that yet.

Soon, he thought to himself.

Soon he would be able to leave it all behind and choose Agatha. Once he was done with Brown, yes, he could leave it all behind and find love.

## CHAPTER 14

“*I* wish to marry your granddaughter,” Grayson declared.  
“Immediately”

The words came out of his mouth with surprising boldness and, much to her credit, Agatha’s grandmother did not blink.

She was a formidable force in her grand gown, shimmering with embroidered peonies, and her silvery hair was laced with jewels.

She lifted her chin and replied, “Your Grace, it would give me great pleasure to know that my granddaughter, and I do assume you mean Agatha, is to be a duchess. Still, this is rather surprising.”

Agatha’s grandmother poured out the tea steadily, not a drop faltered, and then with un-shaking aplomb, she handed him a delicately painted pink teacup and saucer.

He was sitting across from her in the sitting room given to her by the Duke of Wildwood for the party. The chambers were sumptuous. All of Wildwood’s were.

He smiled a slow smile. “I’m glad to hear that you like the idea of Agatha as a duchess. She will be an excellent one.”

She inclined her head and her smile changed slightly. “But I do have concerns, Your Grace, as to the speed with which you are moving. The rapidity of it is, well, a surprise. You barely know her.”

He contemplated the perfect tone of his tea and the beautifully painted birds in flight on the rim of the cup. “Does one need to know another so very well to marry them? Would you not argue that the ton is peopled with terrible marriages based on love and that some of the best are based on virtually no acquaintance?” He lifted the cup, took a sip of the rich

beverage, then observed, “The Duke of Richmond comes to mind.”

“Yes,” the dowager agreed without hesitation, pouring out her own tea, the engraved silver pot glinting. “That is true, but the duke and duchess’s children? What a disastrous set of circumstances largely happened in those marriages.”

“I will not argue with that,” Grayson replied, “but I have a feeling, Dowager, that you would be pleased to see Agatha rise to the top of society.”

“You are not mistaken, but nor would I see her hurt,” she countered firmly. “I have seen far too many a bad marriage. Convince me, Your Grace, that you would be a good husband to Agatha and that all will be well.”

“Define a good husband,” he countered, lowering the cup to the saucer as he eyed the dowager carefully.

She was a wily, intelligent woman, one he respected immensely, and he needed her approval, or at least not her resistance.

He had formulated the plan after the interlude in the forest.

He did not want to let Agatha go ever, and he was determined to bind her to him, no matter what it took. Because he was, if he was honest, terrified that once she understood what he was about, she might leave him forever.

But this way, she could not.

It was selfish.

In the end, he was exactly what she said, but he wasn’t going to deny either of them this because it was clear that they were destined for each other. Both of them knew it deep in their souls, and so he would let nothing come to chance in this. No errant hurt feelings, no confusions, no. Marriage would bind them together as it should.

The dowager tilted her head to the side, her jewels aglow. “I want to know that you’re not going to hurt her.”

He let out a dry laugh at that. “Please, you are not so foolish as to think that I will not hurt her at some point.”

She cleared her throat. “A realist, are you?”

“I used to be an idealist,” he replied softly, stunned at the pain now aching deep within himself. “I think Agatha knows that. But life has taught me that no matter what we do, suffering will occur. I shall never hurt her intentionally,” he said. “As a matter of fact, I shall make it my lifelong goal to ensure that Agatha never knows uncertainty, indecision, or an unbalanced life again.”

The dowager stared at him. “I see you understand well the difficulties that Agatha faced before I took her in hand.”

He nodded, sensing that without the dowager’s steadying hand, Agatha’s life might have been very different and full of suffering. “I will give her a fortune, land, houses, but most of all, I will give her the knowledge that I will never abandon her. I cannot say that I will never let her down. I am human, not immortal. I am capable of great folly, but rest assured that whatever she wants, I will support. Whatever she needs, I will endeavor to give her, and I will never leave her twisting in the wind. If I see her breaking, I shall ensure that all is done to support her.”

“I see,” she replied before she drew in a deep breath. Then she asked, “Do you love her?”

Love. It was such a powerful word. It seemed to him that it meant many things to many people.

“I do not know what this feeling is exactly. Many would say it’s only been a few days, so how can one love? But something happened when Agatha and I saw each other.”

“I know,” the dowager agreed.

“You do?” he asked, stunned. He straightened, determined to seem unflappable. But what was happening in this room? He knew it was of colossal import. His entire future was being decided here.



Brown would, of course, dictate his future happiness, but there would be no happiness at all if Agatha was not in Grayson's life. And the only way to ensure that she absolutely would be was to marry her and quickly. He did not want Agatha to be able to change her mind.

Perhaps it was a villainous thing to do, but he was willing to practice a bit of villainy to have her, to make her his for all time. It was dangerous, the road he was on, but he did not care anymore because he knew he could make Agatha happy in a way no one else could. He was the only one who would likely understand the depths of her. He would not let her go into the world unsupported again.

"You wish to marry her, and you do not know if you love her." The dowager tsked, then allowed, "But the things you say make sense, and I've seen the way she looks at you. I've heard the way she talks about you. But you are a bit of a dark soul, are you not?"

"Circumstances made me so," he replied carefully. "War would do that to any man, would you not agree? And I think you know my family history better than most."

"I do," she said softly, "and it gives me concern. Will you carry out and carry on the miserable circumstances of your upbringing?"

"They weren't miserable," he gritted, a shocking dose of emotion rising to his surface. He was surprised how she'd managed to hit the wound.

"No?" she said, her brows rising.

"No, and I think you know that too," he pointed out. "You knew my mother."

"I did," she sighed. "An exquisite, lovely woman. I am so sorry that the sorrow of it all was simply too much for her to bear."

He was surprised she did not mention his father, who had died of apoplexy on the news of the King of France's

execution. He had hunted with the king and been friends with many of the men at his court.

The blood bath had taken a toll on his father's heart, and the stress of it had eventually ended his life.

"She did not take her own life, Dowager," he ground out, returning to the subject of his mother.

"I did not mean to imply—"

"You did in a way," he cut in. "She faded away as so many do under grief. She could not bear the loss of her friends. It made her susceptible to illness, and when the complaint of her lungs came, she did not have the will to fight. I wish she had."

"And you?" the dowager countered. "Will you have the will to fight for Agatha?"

"You have no idea what I'm willing to do to fight for Agatha, to fight for the people I care about."

The dowager nodded, relenting, with some ease. "Then how can I say no? The marriage shall take place in London. It will be at St. Paul's—"

"No," he said, leaning forward, "it will not."

"No?" she echoed.

"It will take place immediately."

She blinked but did not deny him. "This is more complex than I would like, Your Grace. For such a sudden marriage must be driven by fear, mustn't it?"

"Must it?" he mocked ever so slightly. "Dowager, I like you, and I have a feeling that you like a good impulsive wedding. A sense of adventure, of passion, of seizing what life offers. That is what I want. She and I know that we want each other. Why wait?"

"Why do it so quickly?" she replied, testing his resolve. "Are you afraid that she will decide...?" Her face softened. "Oh, you are. You are afraid she will change her mind."

“Yes, I am,” he said, “but not for the reasons you might think.”

“Explain them to me.”

“Her mother lived a rather wild life,” he ventured carefully, not wishing to give offense. “Did she not?”

“Yes,” the dowager said tightly. “She did, and I would have saved her from it if I could.”

“Then let Agatha marry me at once. Do not let Agatha think she has to go on in this world alone or be drawn into the chaos she has always known. She might not think, in the end, that she deserves someone who will make her life one of ease and peace. Because she might choose what she has always known if she has too much time to think about it. She has not seen marriage as the greatest of things, has she?”

The dowager shook her head, her shoulders sagging for the barest of moments. “No.” But then her shoulders returned to their regal angle and a knowing smile returned to her lips. “I see what you are about. You are making an adventure, something that will appeal to Agatha, for that is how Agatha has always lived her life?”

“I do not want her to escape my grasp, but that grasp is loving and not cruel. I promise you that.”

She narrowed her gaze. “And you will give her all the things that you say?”

Grayson nodded.

“Good or I shall stab you at a ball with a hat pin.”

He laughed. “I’m glad to hear it,” he said. “You and I are similar creatures.”

The dowager gave him a dangerous look. “I am not jesting,” she said. “If you hurt her, I will destroy you with every power I have.”

He reached out and took her hand in his, admiring the lines and marks of age. “Agatha should be so loved, and I too will

love her in turn.”

The dowager let out a relieved breath, as if she had been holding in her fears for Agatha for a lifetime. “When will the marriage take place?”

“Tomorrow,” he informed swiftly. “I’m going to get the license as quickly as possible. Will you be a witness?” he queried.

“I would not miss it for the world, but I think that first you had best ask Agatha.”

“Do you think I should do it or you?”

She let out a laugh then. “You can’t possibly think it would be a good idea for me to ask her, or are you afraid that she will say no?”

He hesitated.

Her brows lifted. “You are afraid that she will say no.”

“Not exactly,” he ventured. “I know that she knows that we should be together, but her childhood, her history, might make her afraid of being married.”

“Do you think she simply wished to be your lover for the rest of her life?” her grandmama asked with surprising honesty.

“I don’t know what she envisions, but I don’t think she’s thought it through,” he said truthfully. “Agatha is very good at living in the moment,” he said softly.

“Yes,” her grandmother admitted. “She is, because to live in the past or the future has been far too painful for her.”

He could feel that ache. Under all her making the best of life. It was there, even if she did not wish to admit it. “Let me make her future a good one then,” he said.

“I shall meet you at the church on Wildwood’s grounds in the morning,” she said. “I assume the wedding will take place straight away?”

“If all goes as it should. And it will. Please keep it to yourself.”

Her brow furrowed. “You don’t wish anyone to know?”

“No,” he said quickly.

With that, she retracted her hand, leaving his aloft. “Something is happening, Your Grace, at this party,” she began carefully. “Agatha knows it. I know it. It’s all too convenient. I won’t ask for specifics because it’s none of my business. You are about to make my granddaughter a duchess, and I like you. I liked your mother, and I liked your father. And I think you are a good man.”

The dowager grew most serious before she warned, “But it’s all going to fall apart if you are not careful.”

He drew in a breath, refusing to be daunted. “Then I must be very careful indeed.”

## CHAPTER 15

*A*gatha was forever collecting new friends.

Not in a shallow way, for she cared deeply about people.

And so, when she met Mary in the garden whilst Agatha was reading a book, she could not stop herself from befriending the young woman.

It was clear to her that Mary was in jeopardy. Something was amiss when Mary had rushed into the garden, seeking refuge by the rose trellis. Agatha had taken her under her wing immediately.

Mary had not confessed all, but Agatha could always tell when a soul was at risk, a product of being raised around so many troubled people. And so now she was doing all she could for her new friend.

That was all she could do to make certain that Mary was all right.

Something seemed off with Mary's father. He was cruel, predatory. She had a sense for people and things, and so she wished she could get Mary away from him. She would do all that she could.

Her cousin, too, was swept up in the Duke of Wildwood's embrace and growing love. Agatha could see that. But there was something amiss with the Earl of Wexford, who was watching her cousin as if he would swallow her up whole and bend her to his will. Indeed, Wexford, as far as she was able to observe, was now looking at Wildwood with suspicion too, looking for the first opportunity to strike.

For a beautiful, charming house party, it seemed there were dangers lurking at every corner.

And then, of course, there was Brown, who had seemed delighted when she won the tennis match but now seemed to

be descending into more chaos. The man was drinking brandy early in the day, spending most of his time in the cards room, or gambling on absurd things.

He had even gambled on the practice duel between Mary's father and the Duke of Hartmore.

She had seen him, distraught after the crowd had begun to slip away. For this time, he had bet wrong.

Yes, he lost more than he won. It gave her pause, all of this.

What was coming? Was there some tide which would sweep them all up?

And then, of course, there was the Duke of Glenfoyle, the beautiful Scottish duke who followed Grayson around like a shadow, though Grayson did not seem to notice.

The Scot seemed perplexed, dark, handsome, strong, but on edge. He was watching a young woman constantly. She had yet to meet that particular lady. She had too much to manage as it was.

And as Agatha headed up to her rooms, ready to find her cousin and have a moment's reprieve from all the affairs whirling about her, the Duke of Talbot slipped up behind her quietly.

"May I have a private word?" he murmured, his hand resting on her waist, his head inclining towards her, and his soft voice a caress over her skin.

"Always," she replied, tilting her head up towards his, longing for his kiss the moment he laid his hand upon her. "But are you comfortable being alone with me?" she teased.

"We have been alone so many times now that we would scandalize all of London."

"Scandal is my nature," she said.

"No, it's not. Not really," he countered gently. "You like to say such things, but I don't think—"

“Cease,” she told him. “Don’t take away my glamorous and adventurous air and turn me into a prim young thing.”

He laughed. “I could never do that.”

With that, they slipped into her rooms and the salon where her grandmama usually took tea.

“Where is she?” she queried, surprised to find the space empty.

“Your grandmama?” he surmised. “No doubt she is down managing all the company and assisting your cousin to capture the Duke of Wildwood’s hand.”

“Do I detect a bit of distaste?” she asked, propping a hand on her hip.

“Not at all,” he defended, raising his hands in surrender. “I think that Wildwood is doing the right thing by following his heart, and now I would like to do the same.”

She stopped at that, and her own heart seemed to thunder to life. “I beg your pardon?” She whirled around and nearly tripped.

“Have I caught you so off guard?” he asked, easily reaching out and balancing her, his fingertips lingering along her bare arms.

“Indeed, you have.” How she loved his touch. It made her feel so alive. “What are you speaking of?”

He stared down at her, his lips parting before he said, “I would like to ask you to be my wife.”

“What?” she breathed, blinking.

“Did I not speak clearly?” he teased, his voice a low rumble.

“You were very clear, but I cannot fathom it.” Indeed, her heart was now thundering with the power of stallions’ hooves, and her blood seemed to hum with exhilaration and disbelief. “Last night in the garden, you seemed on edge.”



“I am on edge,” he said. “You put me on edge because I cannot let you go. Everything inside me tells me that you are meant to be in my life, and I will not ignore that voice. At first, I thought it was just to help me here in my endeavors—”

“Which you still refuse to tell me all about,” she pointed out.

He smiled slowly. “I will. Eventually,” he promised.

“Will you?” she queried, unsure if she could truly believe him, and yet she felt an affinity with him that she felt with no other person.

“Will you marry me and be my duchess?”

She tilted her head to the side. “You know I will,” she said without artifice.

“You will?” he said, astonished.

“Why are you surprised?” she replied, feeling a touch of joy. “I have been clear from the beginning that you are the one that I want, the one that I am going to fight for, the one that I caught in my net.”

He laughed, looking chagrined. “Caught?”

She wagged her brows at him. “Indeed.”

“Well, then do not free me. Ever,” he said, his voice a low rumble as he wrapped his arms about her. “We shall be married at once.”

“At once?” she echoed as she leaned back. “Why so quickly?”

“Your grandmama has already approved,” he informed.

“You talked to Grandmama?” she gasped.

“It is the right thing to do,” he said simply. “I cannot marry a young lady without the permission of her family.”

“I had no idea you were such a traditionalist.”

“Perhaps not in everything,” he said, “but in some things. I want your family to approve. I want their support.”

“And you knew you could not write to my mama, and Papa is too far away if you wish for a quick wedding.” This was what she wanted. She was not surprised. For it felt destined, and yet... The speed of it. Surely, that meant it was truly meant to be. Things that happened easily were good, were they not? “But why do you want a quick wedding?”

“Because I don’t want you to slip through my fingers,” he said, “and I want to have you. Now.”

“You can have me now,” she returned, sliding her hands to his shoulders, her body heating at the possible seduction he was about to unleash.

“I want to have you in every way,” he said. “I want you to be one with me in the eyes of the law. Our hearts, our minds, our hands... And our bodies too.”

“We could begin with our bodies,” she said softly.

“Yes, we could, but I want this to be done in accordance with tradition, with the law,” he murmured, but there was conviction in his gaze. “I don’t want to ruin you.”

“Oh, Grayson,” she laughed softly, almost pained, for she hungered for him. “You have ruined me a dozen times over already. If we had been caught—”

“Aha,” he cut in, “but we have not been caught, so let us do this as we should, so no one will be able to say a thing. We shall have the marriage license, we shall be married in a church, and we shall tell everyone that we married for love.”

“All right then,” she breathed, for how could she argue with such a case. “When shall we marry for love?”

“Tomorrow morning. Your grandmother will come. I shall arrange it with Wildwood’s vicar.”

“Can you do that?” she asked, astounded.

“Indeed, I can, and it will be done.”

“But are you sure?” she protested. “This seems so sudden.”

His expression turned serious, a muscle tightening in his jaw. "I made a decision last night. When you followed me into the woods, I saw it on your face, how much you want to heal me, how much you fear for me. I want you to be assured that all will be well. I want you to know that I am yours and you are mine, no matter what befalls us."

Fear laced into her heart then and her throat tightened. All she wanted was to experience joy in this moment, but doubt whispered to her instead. "What you are saying right now is very romantic, but I do not know if you actually believe it."

"What I know," he said fiercely, "is that you belong with me, and you have told me that I am yours. Will you go against that now?"

"No," she said without a second thought.

"Good," he growled gently. "Then have yourself ready and at the church tomorrow morning. Eight o'clock. And you will be mine officially. And no one and nothing will ever be able to take you from me."

"Why would they?" she asked playfully.

His mouth tightened. "You have seen what life can do."

"Yes, I have," she countered. "But it will not do it to us," she vowed boldly.

She was determined that her vow would be true. She prayed with every fiber of her being that this was a love for the ages, and that the voice inside her had not tricked her or lied.

He was hers and always would be, and she loved him, and he loved her. She could hardly believe it was all coming to pass just as she dreamed.

Of course, he had not said the words I love you. Not really.

She paused, then forced herself to ask, "Do you love me?"

He stared at her. "I have not felt anything like this in my whole life, and perhaps that is love. I cannot deny it, and I cannot ever let you go. That, I know to be true. Because you

are the only thing that has spoken to my heart since the death of my friend, and I would be a fool to turn away from that.”

“Then do not be a fool,” she replied, letting his words be enough.

They had to be.

And with that, he gave her a soft kiss. “I must go.”

“No,” she petitioned, holding him. “Stay,” she insisted.

“I cannot.”

“Why?” she lamented, longing to seal their promise.

“I have a marriage to arrange.”

“Then you must go,” she sighed, “and I will see you on the morrow. In a short while, I will be your wife, and you will be my husband.”

Grayson backed away slowly, then headed out the door and into the hall.

She stood alone, wondering what she had just agreed to. It did not matter. From the moment she’d seen him, she knew what the outcome would be. Still, that dratted fear—a fear that this was all going too easily, too swiftly—swam to the surface again.

Things had been hard all her life, though she had pretended to the contrary.

Perhaps... Perhaps the universe was relenting now and giving her the love she had always longed for. At last, she would have a true family, and she would have the man of her dreams.

Nothing would stand in their way.

She would not let it.

## CHAPTER 16

Grayson hauled back Glenfoyle's bedclothes with a flourish and bellowed as he turned away, "Get up."

Then Grayson headed for the window and stared at the moonlight spilling over the garden.

Glenfoyle let out a curse. "Och, why the devil are you in my chamber?"

"Because I need someone to go with me," he replied as he folded his arms across his chest.

"What the blazes for? Are you going to fight a duel?" Glenfoyle asked as he pulled on his breeches and slipped on a linen shirt. The rustle of clothes was the only sound filling the room.

Grayson's lips twitched for a moment as he readied himself to deliver the news. "Not a duel. Something worse."

"Worse?" Glenfoyle echoed as he yanked on his boots, the heels clamping on the ground as he came around the side of the bed and followed Grayson over to the window.

Grayson arched a brow. "Yes, I'm getting married."

"Married?" he bellowed back. "I would assume to Agatha?"

"Yes, you are correct."

"So what the devil do you need me for?" Glenfoyle narrowed his gaze. "To hold your hand?"

"We're going to go and wake up the vicar," Grayson informed.

"Why, mon?"

"I think he'll need some bribing," Grayson said.

“To marry you two?” Glenfoyle scoffed. “Does Grandmama not approve?”

“Grandmama approves mightily, but you know how it is.” He shrugged. “We’re not a member of the parish here, and so some money will have to exchange hands. Perhaps a bottle of brandy.”

Glenfoyle gazed back at his bed longingly. “Couldn’t we do it in the morning?”

“No,” Grayson said. “I want to get married in the morning.”

“Bit of a rush, don’t you think?”

“Anything that’s worth doing should be done now,” he returned to Glenfoyle.

“Come on then.” Glenfoyle gave a nod, but before heading out, he put his hand on Grayson’s shoulder. “Let’s go downstairs and clear our heads before we do this irrevocable thing.”

“It’s too late. I’ve asked her to marry me.”

“Still.”

“What do you have in mind?” Grayson asked warily.

“You’ll see.” And with that, he followed Glenfoyle out into the dark hall, now long silent since dawn was about to make its appearance.

They headed down through the maze-like great house, then through the back servants’ stair and out to the lake, to an area covered largely by willow trees.

“Get in,” Glenfoyle commanded, stripping off his boots.

“What?” Grayson gave a shudder. “I am not like the rest of you. I do not necessarily seek pain.”

Glenfoyle laughed dryly. “Aye, you do. Don’t be ridiculous. Now, get in. A good swim will put your head right.”

Fine. You've asked her to marry you, but wait and get married in London."

"I'm getting married today, in a few hours, and you're going to be my second—"

"Surely you mean your witness," Glenfoyle challenged as he tugged off his shirt and stood bare-chested in the strange light before dawn.

"Witness. Second. Is it so very different?" Grayson queried, realizing he was likely not getting out of a frigid swim.

"Och, damnation," Glenfoyle said. "You really mean it, don't you?"

"Indeed, I do."

"I'm not going with you until you've shown me that you have a clear head." Glenfoyle eyed him skeptically. "Have you been drinking?"

"Not a bit."

"Right." With that, Glenfoyle pulled off the last of his clothes and raced into the cold, dark water.

Dark water... He'd once thought about casting himself into dark rushing water. If he had, he never would have had to think of the past again.

But he would not have met Agatha.

The calm lake and his future beckoned.

Glenfoyle bobbed to the top, tossing his damp hair back from his face. He shuddered. "Och. That's brisk. I needed that. You've sent me into a shock."

Grayson let out a low laugh. Glenfoyle in a shock? That was a surprising thing. He did not know the Scottish duke could be shocked at all.

"In!" commanded Glenfoyle.

“Fine,” Grayson called. “If that is what you require, then I’ll do it.”

He hauled off his own clothes quickly and jumped into the freezing water, and for a moment, he could not think. Not a single thought went through his head, and then when he resurfaced, he drew in sharp breaths.

“Bloody hell, why does anybody do this?”

“Because it’s invigorating,” Glenfoyle declared with a grin. “You should come to Scotland and have a swim. This is positively tropical.”

“Tropical, my arse,” Grayson mocked. “Clearly, you’ve never been to the south of Spain or Italy.”

“Many times,” Glenfoyle said, “but that’s nothing. All that is silliness and fluff. This will make you strong, and Scotland would make you stronger.”

“I do not doubt it, old boy.”

“Don’t call me old boy,” Glenfoyle warned. “Now, swim and breathe and come to your senses.”

He did swim and he did breathe, and the pain of the water was mighty for a moment, but then all became peaceful. The cold water of York, even in summer, made him see with utter clarity that he was doing exactly what he was supposed to do.

“I want to marry her,” he said at last.

Glenfoyle turned towards him, treading water. “That’s truly what you wish? To marry Agatha?”

“Yes,” he said.

“And are you giving up your revenge?”

“No,” he replied.

“Are you going to tell her about our pact?” Glenfoyle asked quietly.

He ground his teeth before he replied, “How could I?”

“Surely, you should.”



“Surely, not all truths need be revealed,” he said softly.

Glenfoyle blew out a slow breath. “Whatever you want then. I’m your friend, and I’ll help you, but I hope that you are not setting your own life afire by doing this.”

“I am securing my life,” Grayson said firmly.

Glenfoyle paused, then agreed. “Right. I only hope you’ll help me when it’s necessary.”

“You know I will.”

Glenfoyle scowled. “I hope so. This has all been one great madness this week. Everything that was supposed to happen has gone out of line. Look at Wildwood. Look at Hartmore. Look at you. God only wonders what Truebridge is up to.”

He had not seen Truebridge for a day, and he did wonder whether his friend was well, but right now he had to focus on his own situation. He almost had Brown exactly where he wanted him.

The man was drinking a great deal of brandy and gambling far too much. People were beginning to comment on it. Brown had sunk into the shadows most of the time, and the truth was he could take no joy from it, but nor could he let the past go.

“Let’s do what must be done,” he called. And with that, they both swam back to the shore and hauled on their clothes and headed towards the vicarage.

They must have looked like complete fools, like two men who’d drunk too much brandy and were now acting like giddy schoolboys as they headed towards the church.

And when at last they reached the vicar’s door, Grayson banged upon it. There was a long pause, and then the door was yanked open. An older lady dressed in a robe and mobcap blinked up at them. “What do you two want? Has someone died?”

“No, someone’s about to get married,” he countered.

“Oh, goodness gracious.” She rolled her eyes and tightened her gown about her. “Then wait till morning. Banns must be called—”

“No,” Grayson cut in swiftly. “I wish to see the vicar. I want a license. I’m getting married this morning in the church.”

“You’re not from here,” the housekeeper all but accused, her gaze suspicious now.

“Please, I’d very much like to see the vicar and am happy to pay for any inconvenience.”

She brightened and then her face transformed as she looked to Glenfoyle and back. “You’re... My goodness. Two dukes on our doorstep. Forgive me. Do come in. I’ll show you into the front parlor.”

And with that, he and Glenfoyle were ushered into the small but well-appointed home to await the man upstairs. And after some noise from the upper floor, the vicar came scurrying down the stairs and into the salon, still tying his cravat.

He blinked behind his gold-rimmed spectacles. His blond hair stood up in several places. “My housekeeper tells me two dukes have entered my house.”

“I still don’t know how she knew,” Grayson observed.

“My housekeeper is very well-informed. Adores the gossip columns in the news sheets.”

“I ken it,” said Glenfoyle. “Impossible to go anywhere these days.”

“Now, what can I do for you, Your Grace?” The vicar looked from one to the other, then cleared his throat. “One of you wishes to get married?”

“It is me,” Grayson said. “The young lady and I wish to be married immediately. This morning.”

“Is there a scandal?” the vicar asked most gravely.

“Not at all,” he assured. “We have fallen in love, and we do not see why we should wait. And her grandmother, who is her guardian, has given approval. And, of course, I should like to make it easy for you in any way that I can.”

The vicar frowned. “Easy?”

“Well, we are not members of the parish, so—”

“I do not see why that can’t be gotten around,” the vicar said gently. “But it is technically against—”

“Are you in need of some new linens or a new window? Or perhaps your poor fund needs a bit of money put into the box.”

“Always,” the vicar said with half a smile.

And for once, Grayson thought this vicar might be willing to take a donation, but he wasn’t a corrupt fellow. There wasn’t the scent of brandy about him, and the man did not seem happily eager to push a young lady into matrimony.

“And you’re certain the grandmother approves, and the young lady has agreed?” the vicar asked, as if reading Grayson’s thoughts. He wrung his thin hands. “I don’t like it when people try to bring an unwilling young woman before me. It’s a most unpleasant state of affairs.”

“I think you’ll find the lady is very willing,” Grayson soothed. “I am a duke after all.”

“Does that mean that every lady wishes to marry you?” the vicar asked calmly.

He was surprised that the little, mouselike fellow had the audacity to ask such a thing. But he liked the vicar better for it.

“Almost,” Grayson admitted. “Whether they like me or not, I do come with quite a few positive things.”

The vicar coughed. “I understand. Well, then I do not see why there shall be any difficulty, though I would like a word with the young woman before the ceremony to make certain

that she is marrying you of her accord. And the grandmother will be there?”

“Yes, the grandmother will be there,” Grayson said.

And with that, he pulled out a ten-pound note and handed it over to the vicar. The vicar stared at it as if it were a pile of gold.

“That is far too generous, Your Grace,” the vicar managed at last.

“It is my gift to you, and I’m quite happy to give it, for you are about to facilitate one of the greatest moments of my life. And you seem like a good fellow who will help others with it.”

“I will,” the vicar replied, reaching out with a trembling hand to take the note. “I’m happy for you, Your Grace. You must love the lady dearly.”

“I wish her to be my wife,” he said simply.

The vicar smiled at him. “Then I shall happily bind the two of you in matrimony. Two souls united forever, here on earth and after. What a beautiful thing,” the vicar said.

“Indeed,” Grayson murmured, praying it was true, hoping beyond hope that they would be together in this life and then in the next one.

## CHAPTER 17

*A*gatha met the vicar in his perfectly pressed robes at the door to his beautiful, old church. The sun kissed the carefully laid stones and a soft breeze danced through the ivy that traced its way up to the roof.

It was a jewel box of a building, something out of a story in its strange simplicity, given the ducal estate.

Though it was small, it was somehow a stunning affair. In fact, without the elaborate chiseled exterior of so many churches of the past, this one's humble nature struck awe into her heart.

The church was very old. It had likely been painted over inside from the time before Henry VIII. All the color, the stories, the gilding, and the pictures had been eradicated by the Church of Edward and his leaders.

The beautiful arches remained, and the trees planted around its exterior made the place feel alive and vital despite its austerity.

The arched doorway with its iron studs upon the ancient paneling was a sight to behold. How many hands had opened that door?

How many children baptized, marriages made, and rites of passing from this world to the next?

She could imagine how many feet had worn smooth the large blocks of stone at her feet.

The young vicar stood in the open doorway as if he was a guardian at the gate. The long folds of his black and white clothes swayed ever so slightly in the breeze and the lace at his throat fluttered.

She wondered if he might be more nervous than she.

He blinked behind his spectacles, rather reminding her of an adoring type of basset hound, eager to make certain she was at ease but uncertain how to begin.

He stepped forward, his hair glinting in the bright morning air as he held out his slender hand. She was surprised by the gesture, but she was also rather touched by it too.

Without hesitation, she went ahead and put her gloved hand in his palm.

She had picked a very simple morning dress, a soft pink with embroidered roses at the hem and at the bodice. Her gloves were lace edged and her bonnet was a simple affair too, one of summer straw with flowers decorating the brim.

“Now, my dear,” he began gently, tilting his head to the side, which gave him a most caring and studious air. “I must inquire. Is this all to your liking? Is any of this against your will? I understand that marrying a duke is generally seen to be a most advantageous state. But I would hate to think that you were being pushed into it, either by the duke himself or your grandmama, who is a rather formidable person,” he added.

The vicar’s face when he said formidable person was ever so slightly strained and simultaneously full of awe.

Her grandmama did that to certain types of people. She was, after all, a personage who dominated a room. Agatha, spending so much time with her, often forgot how incredible her grandmama was, but when seeing her through the eyes of others, it was always a refreshing reminder.

She smiled gently at the vicar. “I promise you that all is well with the world. I have been pressured into nothing. The duke and I are suited, but I cannot tell you how I am heartened by the fact that you are on the side of the ladies and that you do your best to protect them in a world that often does not.”

He gave her a gentle nod, then he all but beamed at her praise and validation. “I am so glad that it means so much to you. It means a great deal to me too. No one should ever be forced into a lifetime with someone, even if it’s what their

family thinks is best. Logic and reason should rule the day in this, don't you think?" he said gently.

"Logic and reason are all very good," she returned carefully, "and I am a student of them, but in this, I promise you, it is a matter of the heart."

"Then," he said, smiling and pleased, "I can proceed without a moment's qualm. But sometimes when a wedding occurs quite quickly, it gives me pause."

She squeezed his hand and leaned towards him, determined to assure his clearly pure conscience. "Well, then you may go forward with a free spirit and wed us. And know that you are uniting two souls together who wish to be united very much indeed."

With his free hand, he lifted the prayer book, holding it as if the leather-bound volume gave him great ease. "I am glad to hear it."

And with that, the vicar took his book, pressed it to his heart, then turned and headed up the aisle to where he would perform the ceremony.

She took a breath and looked down at the flowers that she had picked and which she could now hold with two hands.

In her soul, she knew that this was exactly what was supposed to happen. And so, despite a faint shade of concern that Grayson was not telling her all, as soon as the first strains of music drifted from the organ, she began to step forward.

She had waited for this all her life. And she would not let fear take any of the joy of it from her.

There was no one to lead her up the aisle today.

Her grandmama was already waiting inside, and she rather liked the idea of going it alone, of sailing forward into her future independently, a force to be reckoned with herself. And so her slippers padded over the long, polished paving stones.

Her grandmother gazed upon her with hope and pride before she gave her an encouraging wink.

Bolstered by her grandmother, she caught sight of the duke waiting before the pews, standing near the vicar, eager for her to emerge.

And when he spotted her, his face transformed from one lined by nerves to one of hopeful awe. But it was a different awe than she had seen on the vicar's face. No, this was more one of wonder and triumph.

She wondered why he felt triumphant.

Perhaps it was defeating adversity or carrying on in the face of it. His friend, the Duke of Glenfoyle, stood at his side, a beautiful man and strong man, but he was not for her.

He looked slightly more skeptical, but he was clearly determined to support his friend.

And when she at last stood before the two dukes and the vicar, Grayson beamed down at her.

For a single instant, a shadow traveled through his gaze. It was impossible to miss it. And for a harsh, unwanted moment, she wondered if the vicar knew something she did not.

Was there reason for her to hesitate or have pause? She did not think so. And she would not allow herself to embrace created or imagined obstacles.

No, her mind was capable of creating a thousand terrifying outcomes if she allowed it. And so she would stay in this moment instead and take Grayson's hand.

When she did, he placed it atop his and they turned to the vicar. The vicar opened his book and began the ceremony, and she felt her heart swell. This is what she had waited for since she was a girl and had made the decision that she would have love, that she would find the man of her dreams and make him hers.

And she had done exactly as she'd vowed. Here he was beside her, standing tall and strong.

She barely heard the words the vicar proclaimed. As if her body was in control, she simply knew when to say I do, and



despite the dreamlike quality of it all, she heard as Grayson also said, "I do."

Suddenly, the vicar was declaring them man and wife.

It was done.

Grayson leaned down and kissed her full on the lips without hesitation, without second thought. She leaned into him, savoring this moment, this powerful union.

Her grandmama and the Duke of Glenfoyle applauded, as did the vicar who looked rather pleased with his ceremony and the enthusiastic result.

Grayson swept her up into his arms, and much to the astonishment of everyone, carried her down the aisle and out of the church.

"That is supposed to be over our household threshold," she exclaimed.

"Well, we are not going to be at any of my houses soon, and I wish to get on with it now."

She beamed at him. "You needn't make it sound like a chore," she said playfully. "Getting on with it, indeed."

"Oh dear," he said. "Is that what it sounded like? Well, know this," he rumbled against her ear in a soft, evocative tone, "I wish to take you to my rooms, and I wish to have you all day and not share you with anyone."

"Good," she said gazing up at him, linking her hands about his neck. "For that is exactly what I wish too."

"Right," he exclaimed. "All mine. My rooms shall be our haven."

Haven from what? her mind suddenly asked her heart, but she shoved the question away.

Her grandmama charged out of the church behind them, clearly having been listening in. Glenfoyle was not far behind.

“That is all well and admirable,” her grandmama called. “But you shall still be expected to come down to dinner, my dear. And perhaps we can make an announcement of your—”

“No, not yet,” Grayson cut in swiftly. “Soon, but not yet. There are still matters at play here.”

Glenfoyle coughed.

“I see there is some great game,” Agatha said, “and perhaps soon you will let me in on the rules.”

“Perhaps,” he said softly, “but for now, I’m going to have my way with you.”

Glenfoyle coughed again and looked away.

Grandmama looked quite pleased. “I’m glad to know it’s starting out so well. I expect grandchildren within a year,” she said enthusiastically. “It’s been far too long waiting. Now off you two go, but I am not jesting. You must be downstairs for the evening celebration. It’s meant to be a great set of entertainments.”

“Don’t worry,” Grayson assured, a steely look entering his eye for a single moment. “I most certainly will be downstairs. Things must be done.”

Agatha found herself wondering exactly what those things were. What was he planning? What was the thread that she could not see that he was about to pull? And it suddenly struck her that they had married before he’d done so.

Well, she was rather relieved because she did not want him to escape her or choose something which would darken his heart. And she felt certain that she could still convince him to choose love over revenge.

“Come,” he said, whisking her up the path back towards the house, leaving her grandmama and Glenfoyle gaping at them, though clearly pleased for them.

Without another word and with singular purpose, he carried her upstairs, ignoring the looks of servants while they took the back way.

Perhaps the servants would begin to gossip about their behavior. Secrets were quite hard to keep after all!

None of that truly mattered. Surely, they would make an announcement tomorrow over breakfast. And all would be well.

Grayson strode to his rooms. And as he went to open the door, she winked at him, struck her hand out, and twisted the latch.

The door easily swung open, and he took her inside, and then shut the panel by leaning against it.

Slowly, so slowly, he turned, draped her against the door, and let her slide down it.

Between himself and that doorframe, she felt herself not as a prisoner but captured by desire and love. His body was strong, intimidating, powerful, and she loved being so intimately close to it. His scent was full of spices and the wind from the outdoors. Something inexplicably male.

It was heaven to her senses, that scent that was a mystery and fully him.

She lifted her hands and touched his cheeks, which were shaved, and yet she could feel the slightest stubble under her fingertips.

She gazed up at him. “Now,” she said, “I need not think twice about embracing you.”

“No,” he agreed, “there is no need to think twice about anything. You are my wife now.”

“And you are my husband,” she declared boldly, loving the sound of husband in her mouth.

He pressed his body against her, pinning her gently to the door, and then he tilted his head down. His hair caressed her forehead.

And then his mouth dipped into hers, meeting hers in a kiss. It was the softest, most patient yet most calculated of

kisses, she was certain.

Oh, not calculated in a dangerous way, but one meant to deliver the most pleasure. For it was hot, hungry, and full of promise.

Grayson brought her to life, emboldening her desire, making her need for him heighten until her skin fairly tingled.

Now, she was not certain where she stopped and he began.

“I, I...”

“Yes,” he said, his voice rough with passion.

She licked her lips. “I do not truly know what comes next. I know in theory, but in practice...” Her breath hitched in her throat. “This is all a mystery to me.”

“Then let me be your guide,” he said. “And we will learn each other, together.”

## CHAPTER 18

*W*ith the warm glow of morning light spilling through the chamber windows, Agatha felt her back pressed against the door and it made her recall the night before, when her back had been up against the rough oak tree, how he had worked magic on her then, making her feel as if her whole world was going to explode with promises of things unknown.

Now she wanted to know.

Oh, how she wanted to know all that awaited her on the other side of bliss, and so she caressed him, full of a desire to learn, to feel. She arched her curved body into his hard one. He was a solid mass of muscle and bone, and he was immovable if he wished it so, but he was clearly eager to move now.

But before wild lust overtook him, he looked down upon her, then slipped his hands up to the coils of her hair. One by one, he slipped the pins free until, at last, her heavy tresses tumbled about her face. They spilled over her shoulders. The locks skimmed the curves of her breasts and teased over the thin fichu that was tucked into her bodice.

“You’re so entrancing,” he murmured. “From the moment I first saw you, I could not look away. I still can’t look away. You are a wonder in every way. From the beauty of your mind to the glow of your skin, to the light in your eyes. Your heart, your glorious heart, spoke to mine. All of you, every bit of you, has me transfixed... And I want all of it.”

“Then have all of it,” she replied boldly. “Do not hesitate. I do not wish to wait another moment.”

He bent then and seized her mouth in a scorching claiming. It was all that she had ever wanted. All that she had ever hoped for. And more.

Somehow this was even more than the kisses that they had already exchanged, more powerful, more incendiary. His broad hand teased down her clavicles, then rested over the swells of her breasts.

He tugged the thin scrap of lace free from her bodice, then his tongue delved deep into her mouth. She wanted to suck his deeper still, to taste him fully, because this felt like some delicious, daring promise of what was to come.

Hot, eager, tingling, his mouth moved downward along her neck, teasing over her soft skin, then to her breastbone, and then over the soft swells of her breasts.

He pressed kisses there before he whirled her around. She suddenly faced the door, her hands plastered to the panel. She wondered what the blazes he was doing. But then she realized he was unlacing the back of her gown. He placed kisses at the nape of her neck as he worked at her clothing. Tenderly, he inched the bodice downward over her shoulders until the entire gown plummeted to her feet, and she stood in her shoes, stockings, chemise, and stays.

He worked at those stays, tugging quickly at the ribbons, as if his own desire was making him less graceful than he might usually be. Then the stays joined her gown on the floor, and she stood in her transparent linen.

He let out a low growl of appreciation.

His hands traveled to the bottom of that chemise. He teased it ever so slowly up her thighs, his knuckles skimming her skin until he had bared her bottom and mons, then her abdomen and lower back. Ever so slowly up, up went the chemise.

“Raise your arms,” he ordered.

She did as instructed because she was so eager for all of this. The air kissed her body and every single bit of it tingled to life. And then when he'd swept the chemise over her head, he pressed his own fully clad body to her back.

It felt strangely erotic, him fully clothed and her standing in nothing but her stockings and shoes. She felt the hard evidence of his desire press into her back and she let out a gasp as he rocked it against her before he pressed his face into her hair.

“Perfection,” he murmured. “Perfection.”

“Such a thing doesn’t exist, husband,” she teased back, even as she ached between her thighs for his touch.

“It does,” he countered, “and you are it.”

Grayson slipped his boot between her feet, then gently urged her legs apart.

She felt exposed and thrilled at once. What ever would he do next?

It was astounding when he kissed his way down her back, skimming along her spine. He paused when he came to her full bottom.

A low rumble of satisfaction slipped past his lips as he pressed kisses to each swell, grabbing them and kneading them with his hands.

And then he bit ever so lightly.

She let out a yelp of surprise.

“Quiet now,” he murmured, kissing the flesh he had just nibbled. Grayson then took her hips in his hands and tilted them, exposing her most secret place to him, a place he had already touched and shown her pleasure, but somehow this felt like more.

She felt totally vulnerable like this.

Another low moan of anticipation hummed out of his throat.

She pressed her hands into the door, the cool panel a strange contrast to her hot body.

Grayson's fingers slipped into her wet heat, spreading her folds which now seemed slick and hungry for him. He teased his fingers over her, and she gasped, rocking herself back to him.

Eager for more, eager for the pleasure he'd shown her before, her thighs began to shake as he traced his fingertips over her most delicate spot. Her mind began to disappear into that cloud of pleasure. And then deliciously, shockingly, he slipped a single finger inside her.

That intense moment of pleasure between them turned into something deeper, something wilder, something even more powerful.

Gently he thrust his finger inside her.

It met some resistance.

He went all the way then, deeper and deeper. Once she was arching her body, searching for more, he added another finger.

She let out a moan of exquisite need at the surprising pressure of it.

He urged her thighs even further apart with his booted foot, then with his other hand, he began teasing her delicate spot, circling his fingers over it, thrusting his fingers deep into her body, touching some unseen spot.

She could barely countenance it.

And then much to her amazement, he slid his fingers out, turned her about with her hips, spread her thighs, and looked at her most private spot.

"Just for me," he said.

Grayson gently exposed the delicate folds there.

As she gazed down upon him, she was stunned by the transformation of his face.

His eyes were hooded with his own intoxicated state of arousal. He leaned forward and sucked her folds into his mouth. She dropped her head back against the door and



gripped his shoulders, lest her legs give way for the pleasure of it was so astounding.

The pleasure was simply too much. Surely, she could not take it!

But he was not interested in stopping. He seemed only interested in driving her further and further into that field of pleasure as he laved her softly with his tongue.

Relentless, he sucked, teased, circled, and kissed, and then his fingers were back inside her. She was transported, and quite without her intent, her body bucked against his mouth.

He held her tightly to him and unyieldingly as he tasted and pushed her ever higher and higher as her body convulsed around his fingers, tightening in pleasure, and she cried out his name.

With that, he picked her up and took her quickly to the chaise lounge by the marble fireplace.

He laid her down, quickly tugged off his shirt, and undid his breeches.

“I cannot hold back another moment,” he said, his voice rough now. “You have undone me. And made me again in the best of ways.”

And as soon as his breeches were undone, his sex sprang free.

She gasped at that hard, glorious member which she knew would soon be inside of her.

It gave her a moment's pause, however. Could she do it? Could she take him in?

But she knew the history of mankind and that her body was made for this.

She nodded at him and opened her thighs, inviting him.

That gesture seemed to push him over the edge, and suddenly he was between her legs, on his knees.

Grayson leaned down, bracing himself on his forearms, enveloping her with his scent and power.

He rocked his sex against her opening, teasing her. His body shook with tension and desire as he slipped the head of his sex against her opening just as his fingers had done a moment before.

And then he thrust in.

Her body tensed and tightened, but he had so readied her that the discomfort was fleeting. He paused for a moment, then, as if he knew how ready she was for him, he began immediately rocking forward, opening her body to him. And to the pleasure he could give her.

His thick, strong sex filled her to the brim, and she loved every single moment of it.

Even as, for a second, she was certain she could not do this. But then her body seemed to relax and ease, and as she realized she could indeed take all of him, she wrapped her legs about him.

Driven by instinct and the need to be as one with him, she wrapped her body about him. A note of such pleasure at the way she welcomed him rumbled against her ear.

And then his hips were moving back and forth, his sex stroking her inside. It was so intoxicating, so perfect. She could not think.

For now there was nothing between them. She did not know where she stopped and he began.

Their breaths and their heartbeats seemed to mingle, pacing together until at last... Oh wondrously, at last, they felt truly as if they had become one.

All thought abandoned her, and she gave into physically feeling the emotions swirling out from her heart, intertwining with him.

As he rocked against her sweetest spot, she felt herself unspool into bliss. She grabbed hold of him, called out his

name, and a power she had never known swept through her body like the ocean tide.

It swept her out forever into pleasure.

And when his entire body tensed with his own release, he called out her name and drove his sex hard one last time. Deep into her body as if he wished to claim her and be claimed in turn.

Grayson collapsed against her as if she had taken everything from him and given it back in turn.

As if she was the center of his world.

## CHAPTER 19

The smile would not leave Grayson's lips. In fact, his jaw almost ached. For many reasons, but most of all the smile that kept tilting his mouth into joy.

He felt transformed by her, as if he had become an entirely different person this week, but most of all since making her his own.

He did not understand how it had happened. All he knew was that he had chosen Agatha, and the world had spun around and left him entirely different.

"Are you going to kill me?" a voice called softly from the shadows.

Grayson jolted and whipped around.

The servant's passage which led down from the chambers the dukes had been using to plan their revenge was usually isolated and empty, but here? Here was Brown standing in the darkness, in a doorway, as if he had been waiting for him.

"I beg your pardon?" he blustered, shaken to have been caught so off guard. And he realized his love for Agatha had affected him in more ways than one. And one of those ways could be dangerous.

He had forgotten the stakes, forgotten the danger...

Bedford's grim warnings surfaced in his mind, and his stomach twisted.

Brown edged out into the half-light, his face sickly. "You must think very little of me if you didn't think I would suspect that something was transpiring." He paused before he leveled gruffly, "You trained me, after all, Talbot. Why would you think that I would not suspect something?"

Grayson shook his head. "I have no idea what you are speaking of. You were invited to a party. I happen to be here.

I'm friends with the host."

Brown nodded, his face taking on a mocking expression. "I see. I see," he said. "And the fact that when you look at me, one moment, all seems well and the next it looks as if you wish me dead?" His mouth tightened before he gritted, "You know, don't you?"

Brown's eyes were glassy in the dark light, as if he was constantly taken by brandy's mind-numbing curse.

The small space was largely filled with their voices, soft and low like gravel.

"Know what?" Grayson challenged, unwilling to be played so easily.

Brown let out a dry laugh, lifted a flask to his lips, and took a long drink.

"You shouldn't do that," Grayson said, sorrow entering his heart like a poison he could not keep at bay. Agatha had helped to purge him of it. But here it was again.

"What?" Brown demanded.

"Drink so much," Grayson whispered. "It's going to kill you."

"Good," Brown countered with false bravado, but there was something chilling in his tone. "I'm longing for death. If I had the courage, I'd take care of it myself, but I think you are going to do it for me."

Grayson swallowed a swift retort. He had fantasized about killing Brown. Wasn't that half of his plan? To make certain Brown's death happened? But now, standing here in discourse with the man after leaving Agatha in his bed?

Now, it felt strange and unpleasant.

"You know what I did," Brown stated.

"And what did you do?" Grayson queried softly, his heart rate beginning to increase, his breath now shallow, wondering... Bloody hell, what was Brown about to admit?

“I am a traitor, though I do not mean to be,” Brown whispered without flinching.

Anger seared through Grayson at those words, and he dug his nails into his palms, struggling to remain calm.

“How can one not mean to be a traitor?” Grayson challenged.

Brown took another drink from the flask. His hands were shaking. “This,” he said bluntly, looking at the flask. “This. This thing that I cannot stop. This thing which has me bedeviled with its brutal charms.”

“The drink makes you do things?” he asked.

Brown nodded. “I cannot stop myself from starting, and when I get to a certain point, I have no idea what I’m saying. And yet, even though I have done the most terrible things, I cannot stop myself from taking the drink up again.”

Much to Grayson’s shock, he did not feel fury at the admission. He felt a vast, aching sorrow.

“I’ve seen so many things,” Brown lamented. “So many cruel acts. Children dead by Napoleon’s army. People crushed, starving in their fields because there are no men to till the land or take care of it because they’ve been forced into war. Do you know what it’s like to witness that sort of destruction firsthand, trying to get information out of people?” A muscle ticked in Brown’s jaw. “It does things to you.”

Excuses.

That’s what Grayson wanted to bite out.

Excuses.

And yet, he could not argue with Brown, for he had not been in the field like that. His work was finding people who could do what Brown and Jean Pierre did, making sure they were capable. And once they were in a position to collect information, he took it, extrapolated meaning, and pieced it all together.

Still, he could not forget how Jean Pierre had died. The horror of it. The being ripped asunder.

Brown looked away. "I said something one night in Lyon when I was drinking...about your friend."

"Oh?" Grayson said, unwilling to commit yet.

Brown swung his gaze back, and at last, there was a grim fire there. "It got him killed, and I think you know it."

Grayson said nothing, wondering if the silence would cause him to utter more.

"I said something about somebody else too," Brown continued, his shoulders sagging. "I was glad when I was recalled. I thank God every day that I'm no longer over there. Not for my own safety, but for others. Do you understand? I am a danger to everyone. I wish I was in jail, but my father won't let it be so. I wish I was dead, but I haven't the courage to do it, and no bullet or knife got me when I was there." He shrugged as if it all disgusted him. "So, I live in this strange land of in-between. I came to this party because I wanted to see what it was about. I wanted to see what was happening. I throw everything at death, begging it to take me, but it won't claim me. No matter what I do. It's not fair. Good people die and yet here I am."

The pain and suffering coming out of Brown was palpable. And Grayson wanted to push on that pain, to drive it further. To make it worse.

Or at least, that was what he thought he had wanted. Had he not striven for that for months? Had he not uttered his vow of revenge like a lullaby every night for months?

And yet he could not easily repeat those words of revenge. Not now in the face of Brown's internal war.

Nor could he get Agatha out of his head, urging him to do better, be better, be kinder, to choose love.

"What do you want me to say?" Grayson asked.

“I want to know if you are playing with me, torturing me,” Brown grated. “I’ve seen the way you’ve pushed me into situations in which I would gamble more. You’re pushing me to the edge, and I think that you’re going to kill me and make it look like I’ve killed myself.”

Was his silence that followed an answer? Grayson wasn’t certain.

How astute Brown was, far more clever than he’d given him credit for. But he should have expected this. After all, Brown was correct. He had trained him. But in that arrogance of imagining he knew Brown’s limitations he had assumed he could seek his revenge without Brown noticing.

What a fool he was.

“Perhaps we can just arrange it together...” Brown mused, laughing darkly. “And then all of this can be over. I can stop doing this dance of suffering.”

Grayson didn’t know what to say.

Brown was swimming in a sea of regret and suffering and had not seemed to focus much on Jean Pierre.

He was consumed with his own feelings, not the pain he’d inflicted on others.

“Do you not think at all about who you hurt?” he said softly.

“Every night,” Brown replied. “I try to sleep but can’t.” He lifted the flask. “And this damn stuff will get me to sleep, but I wake up, and then I’m awake for hours in the night. You see, I think of Jean Pierre and the other man all the time. I think of how they died. I think of how we laughed together and talked, how I met them. We were careful. And I think on how I destroyed them with an errant word. How my father’s power kept me abroad too long. It’s not right, the power of old men to do this to people, to keep incompetents in the field.”

But Brown was also skilled enough to stay alive. For all he said, he had not given in to death. He had not succumbed to it.



He was still fighting for survival, even if he didn't realize it.

“You know that you're incompetent?” Grayson asked softly.

Another almost frightening smile curved Brown's mouth. “Oh, indeed I do. Anyone who does what I have done, and continue to do, is most definitely incompetent.”

Brown lifted his flask in a mockery of a salute. “I've been broken for a long time, and I cannot seem to get myself right. I can't even make up for what I've done. I would need to spend a lifetime to make up for what I've done.”

And suddenly Grayson whispered, “He was my oldest friend.”

“Yes,” Brown said, “I know. And I was your friend once too, but here we are.”

Grayson wanted to growl fiercely, You were never my friend like Jean Pierre, but he couldn't. He and Brown had been close enough. But he had made Brown an asset. He'd used him, he supposed. He'd set Brown on the very road that would destroy him and Jean Pierre and then... Oh God, then he realized why he was full of so much hate and so much pain.

It wasn't Brown that he hated to the core, it was himself. For he had set all these pieces in motion. He had recruited Brown. He had made it so that Brown knew about Jean Pierre, and he had not been careful enough. Perhaps if he had been, perhaps if he'd realized that Brown did not have the strength or the spirit for it, Jean Pierre would be alive.

“I would like to see you dead,” Grayson said honestly, “but I do not think that I can do it. If I'm honest with you, I planned it. But things have changed.”

“Changed?” Brown challenged.

“Yes,” he said, his gaze unwillingly going towards where his chamber was above.

“Ah...” Brown breathed. “Agatha. She's changed you. Love can do that.” Brown blinked as he spat out, “I've never

known love like that. The way she looks at you, it's as if your feet don't even touch the ground. And you look at her..."

"What?" Grayson prompted.

"You look at her as if you would lay down and die for her. But the real question is, my friend, will you live?" Brown hissed. "Because I think if you keep on the road that you are on, you're going to end up just like me. You won't be able to face yourself, and you certainly won't be able to face her."

"Trying to rescue yourself, are you?" Grayson demanded.

Brown shook his head, weaving slightly. "No, the more I live, the more pain I know. But I'm warning you. I'm warning you about dark roads and where they go."

"I've already had warnings," Grayson replied, even as a strange emotion snaked through him.

"Well then, heed them." Brown leaned forward and stabbed his finger at the air in Grayson's direction. "I had warnings too. Warnings when I drank a bottle of brandy and would say something odd, and someone would ask me about it. I should have gone straight home to the English countryside then where I could do no harm. I should have ignored my father's orders. I should have run. I should have escaped to America. I should have done anything but stay where I could get men killed. But I did not. Do not be like me." Brown winced. "Do not turn into a shadow of yourself. You still have hope, and you still have her."

It was shocking that Grayson was now being warned of danger by the very man he wanted to kill, the very man he was determined to destroy.

"Go now, back to her," Brown urged. "Perhaps I'm going to die soon, and you'll find peace. Our perhaps, you'll be behind me in the shadows, and I won't see it coming. I'm all right with that. If death takes me, I cannot escape that, though it seems I cannot simply seem to give into it. I wish I could. But I don't think that you're a bad man yet, Grayson."

"Do not be certain," Grayson began.

“Be careful,” Brown cut in, “because you’re about to become a bad man, and you won’t ever be able to go back.”

## CHAPTER 20

*The* revels of the evening had begun.

Lanterns were strewn all throughout the back garden, which cascaded down towards the lake. The pathways were lined with the most beautiful lights, embossed with color from their paper star shapes.

Acrobats and dancers performed in every open space and nook. An elevated dancing stage had been erected for couples to dance upon. The sugary notes of an orchestra filled the air. The lovely notes of Mozart and Bach made the air feel like a fairy land.

It was so entrancing. One could easily become enchanted here.

Agatha wanted to drink in every single moment. She had seen nothing like this in years. It brought to mind the pleasure gardens of Europe. The English were always trying to live up to the standards of their European counterparts, and tonight? Well, tonight the Duke of Wildwood had struck the right note.

Everyone seemed to be full of ecstasy at the entertainments that had been laid on.

Refreshing punches and champagne flowed freely. Servants in elegant livery floated back and forth, making certain that everyone had what they wanted.

Laughter filled the night, but she did not feel like laughing. Her cousin had completed the most beautiful of paintings and was now fully in love with the Duke of Wildwood.

Agatha could not tear her eyes away from how happy they seemed to be together, and yet there was still something. Was there not? Some danger in the air. She couldn't quite put a finger on it, and she was half afraid if she said anything, people would think that she was mad.

She was not a soothsayer, after all. But the Earl of Wexford kept prowling the grounds, looking as if he wished to tear someone apart. He was not pleased that Wildwood had gotten to her cousin first and that her cousin had chosen Wildwood.

Things were also not good with her dear friend, Mary. Yes, Mary's father looked, well, frankly far more frightening than Wexford.

He looked as if he could easily kill someone.

He was a soldier, a colonel, a battle-hardened man. And when she came upon Mary and her father together, she could hear the fear in Mary's voice as they whispered back behind the house.

Agatha had been looking for her friend because they were supposed to go down to the fireworks together, and she knew the jeopardy that Mary seemed to be in.

Now as she stood, tucked against the castle wall, overhearing the dark words Mary's father hissed before yanking the girl out towards the garden, Agatha knew what she had to do.

She whirled about, determined to find Grayson.

He was the only one who would be able to solve this. Wasn't he? And when at last she found Grayson and told him what she had heard, his eyes had widened and a cold look had washed over him.

"Come," he'd barked.

The next thing she knew, they were rushing down a path towards the Duke of Hartmore, who appeared to be waiting for someone.

Mary. Hartmore was waiting for Mary. Only she would never come.

The tension between the men was palpable, and she felt it in her bones that this night was going to turn deadly.

She could barely hear a word they spoke as a chill coursed through her flesh.

Her mind raced to her cousin, to Mary.

She could think of little but their safety and Grayson's.

Suddenly Grayson turned to her. That fierce look, one she had never seen until this night, had turned his visage into the mask of an avenging angel.

It was at once terrifying and beautiful to behold.

He took her arms in his grip. "You must go to your cousin. Stay safe with her."

The words felt muddled in her head, like she was listening through a tide, and she wasn't even certain that was what he had said.

Still, she nodded as he turned her on her heel and gave her a gentle push towards the castle.

Her heart began to skip in horrifying beats.

What did Grayson mean safe?

Was she in danger?

Mary was the one who was in danger, surely! And she could not abandon the girl she had just met and felt an affinity for.

She glanced back over her shoulder and caught sight of his face again. It was steely now and hard, as if he was about to go into battle.

Her mouth dried as she lingered on the path for a moment. Suddenly, she feared she might lose the husband she had only gained that morning. But she could not stop him from his course, for he was with his friend, the Duke of Hartmore.

She had not really seen them together much before, but in that instant, she could tell that they were as one. And as Hartmore headed out into the shadows and Grayson suddenly

darted down a different path, she prayed beyond hope that Mary would be safe and that they would indeed rescue her.

With that, she headed into the dark night, hoping beyond hope that she would be able to do as her husband asked, but she could not ignore the ever-growing command in her heart.

It was Grayson she needed to keep safe.

He was in danger too.

So, she headed for the gamekeeper's cottage.

A gasp of shock nearly slipped past her lips when she spotted Grayson emerge, a firearm in his hand. She stifled that gasp, lest she alert her husband that she had not followed his urging.

As he headed down the path towards the forest, she darted inside and headed to the racks and shelves.

Quickly, she located the pistols. She took one down and filled it with powder and primed it. It was a skill she had learned on the continent with her mother who'd believed in being safe when traveling and that a young lady should be able to defend herself from highwaymen.

The feel of the weapon was familiar in her palm.

She aimed the mouth carefully out and to the side, lest she trip and accidentally shoot herself.

Swallowing before she drew in a fortifying breath, she steeled herself to the uncertainty of what was to come and headed out, back into the night, to find Grayson, to save him if necessary.

She took the path he had chosen, carefully and quietly. But when she heard the voices out in the forest, she crept towards them.

And it was then that she realized Grayson did not need help. He was already ready. He stood alone, watching two men grapple on the earthen floor not far away.

Mary stood nearby her body wracked with fear.

Grayson lifted his weapon, and just as a burst of fireworks exploded overhead, lighting the night sky, he pulled the trigger...

And saved his friend, Hartmore.

The firearm exploded at the exact time as the fireworks, masking the noise.

Mary's father, the colonel, suddenly collapsed over Hartmore's frame.

The Duke of Hartmore exhaled a whoosh of air as he let out a groan of relief.

Mary raced forward to take the man she loved in her arms, and Grayson murmured something to them. Then he turned and walked in her direction, though he could not yet see her in the darkness.

Dear God in heaven, her husband was a sight to behold. Like Gabriel with his fiery sword, laying waste to cities as he ventured back up the path.

He turned away from her, and she watched him go, stunned by his power. He had just saved his friend, just saved Mary, and she did not know what to do. She was in the position of observer, the position of one who had witnessed a powerful act. Some might be horrified, but she was not. Her husband was so capable, so strong, so loyal.

She began to follow him quickly up the path. Now that the danger seemed to be gone, she called out his name to stop his flight as more fireworks exploded overhead, bathing the sky in a crimson glow.

She did not know why Grayson was winding into the forest. Perhaps he needed a moment alone.

Just as she took breath to call his name again, an arm snaked about her and tugged her back against a boney but broad chest.

Then the man's other hand grabbed her pistol.



He yanked her towards a tree, then smashed her wrist against the tree trunk.

She cried out as pain lashed through her hand.

The man did not yield but smashed her hand against the hard trunk again.

This time, though she willed her grip to remain true, her fingers opened and the pistol tumbled to the earth.

“Grayson,” she shouted.

The man twisted her hard and, for a second, she feared her neck would snap.

He bent her like a doll, with no care for her survival, as he reached down and retrieved her pistol.

She felt him tuck it into his waistband. Then he seized her hard and jerked her back into his body.

“Shout his name again,” he demanded.

She gritted her teeth then, refusing to do as bid. She would not endanger the man she loved.

But it mattered not. He must have heard her earlier cry, for she heard her husband’s footsteps heading back towards them.

The sour note of brandy drifted over her. It was very clear to her who had her now, the man who was determined to make her husband suffer, to make her suffer now too. The one who she had seen in the forest, who hated himself so thoroughly.

Self-hate was the most dangerous of all, she’d found. And now, it was proving true.

It was Brown.

“Why are you doing this?” she whispered.

“Because I think that you have driven your husband into being a good man.”

“Why is that a bad thing?” she said.

“Because he was going to put me out of my misery and now he won’t because of you.”

Grayson came back around the path swiftly, and as he spotted her trapped in Brown’s viper-like embrace, he froze on the spot.

“Let her go,” he called out. “You’ve done enough damage, haven’t you?”

“I have,” Brown agreed. “I won’t deny it. I have done a great deal of damage. But you came here with a purpose, and I need you to fulfill it and stop wasting time. I want you to put me out of my misery.”

“You are not a dog,” Grayson gritted. “I’m not going to put you down. And you’re not rabid either, though you’re close. Please let her go, and you can still somehow find a way to make amends for all that you’ve done.”

“I cannot,” Brown shouted. “I am not in control of my demons. They have swallowed me up.”

“It is never too late,” she protested.

Brown shook her hard, and her teeth clacked together.

“I know you have seen men fall at gambling tables, throwing their fortunes away, choosing opium, choosing women,” he hissed against her ear, his breath hot. “I know you are not like many of the other ladies of the time. You have witnessed the fall of men who should have been great but succumbed to the weakness of the flesh. But I have never been a great man. I’ve only ever been weak.”

“Then you can grow strong,” she said, desperate to make him see, but she feared that he had chosen his dark cave long ago and would allow no light in.

“No,” he growled. “I cannot. Do not think that you can trick me.”

Grayson took a step forward.

“Do you have a weapon?” Brown demanded.

“I do,” Grayson said, “but the shot is gone.”

“Drop it,” Brown demanded.

Grayson placed the firearm down slowly. “I don’t think you’ll actually kill her.”

And then Brown slipped out a thin blade, one used by card sharps and those who wished to keep their weapons hidden on their person.

It was a small stiletto, and he pressed it to her jugular. “You do not think I will? It seems I must force your hand, Grayson. Do you understand? Because I know that you will save her. You will not let her die. You would not have let Jean Pierre die either.”

And then she realized that was what all this was about.

Grayson was here to avenge someone named Jean Pierre.

The secret to all of this?

Hartmore must know it too. Had Hartmore been after the colonel? Had her husband come to destroy Brown and kill him? Was this the centerpiece of all of it? Under the guise of this glorious house party, death loomed.

And Wexford, dear God and heaven. Wexford and the Duke of Wildwood? The pieces were falling into place for her. Wildwood must have some quarrel with Wexford.

This entire house party was one of vengeance and death and destruction under the beautiful glitter of gold and the lilt of music.

So many had come, lulled by the promise of joy.

Agatha let out a dry, barking laugh.

Grayson looked startled.

“My God. Have you gone mad all of a sudden?” Brown gritted in her ear. “You seemed of better sense.”

“Yes,” she declared. “Yes, I have gone mad because all my life I have chosen joy and love and hope. I came to this party

and was tricked into believing it was a thing of beauty. There was never any beauty to it at all. It is false. It is made of misery. Pain has driven everything. Your melancholia,” she called to Grayson, “wasn’t what was driving you. It was killing Brown that compelled you, wasn’t it?” Her voice shook.

And when Grayson met her eyes and said nothing, she knew that she was right.

## CHAPTER 21

Grayson had not understood how profoundly terrible it would be when Agatha put all the pieces together.

And of course she did. She was very clever. But the worst part was how it was happening now, with Brown pushing it all into place.

Why had he not acted in the hallway? Why had he not dropped Brown then? Because Agatha had awakened love in him. That was why. He was questioning his own path of vengeance and whether he could truly do it.

And now look where he was.

It did not matter what Brown said. At his core, the man could not lift himself out of hell. No matter how much Grayson changed and wished to find a way to show Brown he didn't have to die.

No matter how Agatha urged him.

No. Brown loathed himself, and so all he could do now was cause harm.

He lashed out at all because he saw himself as a victim. Yes, Brown would hurt others to protect himself. And whether Brown realized it or not, that was exactly what he was doing now. He saw his own suffering as the height of everything, and Grayson could not look away from that.

He had to save his wife. He had to protect Agatha. But killing Brown might not be the answer. Would Agatha ever forgive him? He had been prepared to face her ire, but not like this.

None of this was happening as it was supposed to.

“Please let her go,” he called out again.

“No,” Brown ground out. “Come forward and find a way to kill me. I wish I could say I’d make it easy. I’ve tried that in the past, but my instinct will not let me die easily. I’m sorry for it. But there it is.”

Agatha let out a whimper, but then she let out a harsh note of frustration. “You bloody men,” she growled. “You bloody foolish men. What is wrong with all of you? Could we not just talk this out? Do we have to resort to this nonsense?”

Brown wound his hand into her hair and yanked her head back. “You have no idea what you are talking about, the suffering that I’ve been through.”

She let out a laugh. “The suffering you have been through is, I’m sure, extreme, but it cannot be more than my friend, Mary. It cannot be more than Grayson standing there. And I have known my share too. Do you think yourself an island or a monolith of pain?”

Brown was silent for a long moment and then she let out a breath. “Dear God, you do, don’t you?”

A single bead of blood blossomed at her throat. Hot and thick, it slid down her skin.

Grayson had known Brown was a dangerous man who had betrayed others, but even in the hall, Brown had made it sound as if he had not done it on purpose.

Yet here, here, when being confronted with a righteous young woman who was not afraid to tell Brown exactly the truth, Brown had pressed the tip of his knife into her neck. And now blood, a purple-black glistening line in the shadows, was slipping down her pale throat.

Horror pulsed through his frame.

He had brought Agatha into this world of vengeance. Being close to her had done this. If he had ignored her at the ball that first night, Brown would have never targeted her. He would not be able to use her.

Another burst of fireworks, gold and purple, danced through the night.

There was nothing else that he could do in this moment.

He strode forward slowly.

Brown stiffened, pulling Agatha back a bit.

Her feet scuffled on the dirt floor of the forest. He did not yet know what he would do, but it was clear he'd fight. As Brown wished him to.

Brown's eyes flared with relief. He nodded, and then he thrust Agatha away. Brown began to charge forward at him, clearly determined to die, to have it all done with and let someone else take him from his misery.

A flare of green chased through the sky, embers dancing across the heavens.

But then, oh then, his beautiful beloved Agatha twisted around as she was falling towards the earth and launched herself at Brown's legs.

She grabbed him by the knees, and Brown crashed forward and pounded onto the earth.

More fireworks burst across the sky, and this time the night was bathed in a crimson rush that shone down on the branches of the trees and bathed them in its devilish hue.

Brown let out a wild note of shock and something else—a yelp of pain.

Grayson ran towards Agatha, away from Brown who lay unmoving. "Are you all right? Are you all right?" he called. "My darling."

She looked up at him with a pale face. Her arms were twisted underneath Brown's body.

"He is very heavy. Why is he not...?" Her eyes filled with dismay and Grayson realized that Brown was unnaturally still.

His body was limp over Agatha's arms. Agatha's arms were being crushed by Brown's legs.

Grayson extricated her slowly.

"I'm so sorry, my love," he whispered.

And then he rolled Brown forward, spotting the pistol wedged under his ribs and the gaping hole from a lead ball just under his chest.

He winced and looked away from the carnage. The pistol must have gone off when he'd fallen to the ground.

Grayson looked to Brown's eyes, which had dimmed but were not entirely vacant. A soft sigh escaped Brown's lips. His gaze turned to Agatha, and then, much to their shock, Brown whispered, "Thank you."

And then he was gone.

Agatha let out a horrified sob.

"No," she cried out. "No."

Grayson stared down at Brown. He wanted to shake the man. How was it that even in death Brown had managed to damage someone, to hurt them, to be selfish? The pain that traveled through him was exquisite, and yet it was nothing compared to what he saw his darling Agatha go through.

"You saved me, Agatha," he said. "You saved me."

"I saved you?" she said. "No, you saved me." Then she began to tremble. "I do not understand what has happened."

"He would've stabbed me. And I didn't wish to kill him. Not any longer."

"I know," she said. "I saw it on your face. I saw that you weren't going to do it because you've realized, haven't you?"

"Yes," he said softly, "that vengeance is not the answer. Only love is."

And with that, he pulled her into his arms and cradled her there on the ground.



“It took this to make me see,” he said, “and I am so sorry. I am so sorry,” he repeated over and over again. “I have been the greatest of fools. I thought...”

“I know,” she cut in softly. “I know you thought it would stop your pain. But you see now, don’t you?”

He nodded. “I do. He truly would’ve killed me,” Grayson said.

She lifted her gaze to his. “I know he would’ve. He wanted death so much. He would’ve done anything to get it. He was in so much pain, but he could not see he was not alone. Why can’t people see they aren’t alone?” she lamented through a stifled sob.

“I do not know, my darling, but you are not alone, and you will never be alone. I will always be there to hold you, to take care of you.”

She wiped tears from her eyes. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted. And yet this. I never thought...”

“I asked you to help me days ago, and you have,” he whispered, trying to soothe her.

“Like this?” she protested, gesturing to Brown.

“No. By showing me that the person who I thought I was? That is not who I am at all. You saved me from that dark path, Agatha. You kept me from heading down it. Even in the hall this very night, Brown stopped me and warned me that I was turning into him, that I would not be able to turn back, that I would be twisted beyond repair. And you have made sure that I’m a creature of the light, not the dark. But I am now afraid that the cost is too high.”

She stared at him. “What is the cost?” she asked.

“You,” he said, “for you have been dragged into this by me.”

She cupped his cheek with her hand made cold by shock. “I would do it again and again to save you, the man I love, to protect you,” she said firmly. “You would’ve done the same

for me.” She licked her lips then and said with all her conviction, “And this is the truth. I think this is exactly how it was meant to be, my love. Because I always knew that the path you were on was to me and not to vengeance.”

“And now you shall make sure that I do not falter from the path,” he said softly, cupping her cheek in turn as they gazed at each other. “And I shall make sure you stay in the light too.”

“I think that’s what this life is,” she said. “Each of us taking turns to make certain that the other does not fall into the dark. When we are alone...that is when the real danger occurs.”

He had had no idea that this house party would turn into one of such hard endings, but also endings of hope and love. Hope and love were the real answers.

Perhaps he had been pushed into saving his friend earlier this evening. He did not regret it. He was a man of action, a man of war. That had not been something that would’ve altered his soul.

But murdering Brown would have. Murdering for revenge was dangerous. Self-defense? Protection? That was altogether different. It was what he had done for Hartmore. And it was what Agatha had done for him.

And as Grayson looked up to the heavens, his soul transformed.

“What are you thinking?” she whispered.

He stared up at those immortal stars which had danced for millennia above the lives of mankind, then he said, “I am thinking how strange it all is and how the universe brought us here to this moment. I have been traveling towards you all my life, Agatha, and you towards me. And nothing will ever take us apart.”

## CHAPTER 22

Late that night, after so many things had come to a head—the Duke of Wildwood facing the Duke of Wexford, the Duke of Hartmore confronting Mary’s father, the colonel, the Scottish duke and his young woman, and that strange one, the Duke of Trubridge—Agatha wished to pull them all together, put them in a room, and give them a piece of her mind.

She’d tell them that they were all mad to have done what they did.

And yet, she could not because destiny had led them all together. Destiny had brought love into their lives. And though there had been darkness and pain and suffering and death, she had come to understand something quite clearly. Something she had thought she understood from her reading.

But now she knew from experience.

Creation came from destruction. Life came from death. And one could not face the beauty of love without having danced with the power of a pained heart. And so, as the dukes each found love in the dawn of life and the true dawn of morning, instead of giving them a good talking to, she found that she wished to celebrate instead.

And so, she took her husband’s hand and led him down to the lake, and she beamed at him. She traced her bare feet along the edge of the water, and he walked with her, hand in hand.

“I feel like more marriages are going to happen out of this state affairs than any party ever has done...” She shook her head. “Which is quite ridiculous, considering what this party was for.”

“When did you realize,” he asked, “what this party was truly for?”

“I always had an idea,” she said honestly. “But in that last day, I began to trace things that were just too odd. But I couldn’t quite define it. I think I didn’t want to. I think I was afraid to. I think I was afraid that if I really saw it, you and I would somehow drift apart.”

He was silent but tightened his grip on her hand. “I was afraid too.”

“Is that why you asked me to marry you?” she demanded, looking up at the last stars, those bright, determined stars of night that began to vanish as the first rays of dawn crept up to the sky. “Because you were afraid?”

“Yes,” he said. “Ask Glenfoyle. Ask your grandmama. They all knew. I think the vicar knew too.”

“What?” she gasped.

“Yes,” he admitted. “The vicar, before you arrived, cornered me just outside the church and asked if it was what I really wanted, marrying you.”

“It’s all right to be afraid,” she said at last. “We are all afraid. We are trembling on the edge of the abyss of life. But we must throw ourselves in, mustn’t we? We must trust that no matter how hard, how dark, how terrible, how frightening it all is that on the other side is bliss.”

He pulled her into his arms.

It made her feel fully alive. The scent of roses and honeysuckle filled the air. Lilies’ perfect aroma danced through the warmth, and Grayson lifted his hands and laced his fingers into her hair.

He lowered his forehead to hers and whispered, “I thought that the world was at an end. I thought I was going to die from it. And that after this house party, there would be nothing left. There was certainly nothing to live for. My mother and father are gone. I don’t have any siblings. No one to love. No children.”

“Children,” she breathed.

“Do you think we should have them?” he asked softly.

“Oh, yes,” she said. “They are a promise of joy and of the world to come.”

“I can see the world through your eyes now,” he replied, his voice deep with hope. “For too long, I saw it only through death and fear.”

“That’s all right,” she said. “We must all pass through that valley.”

“Oh, Agatha,” he said, cupping her face gently. “I have been to war, I’m a duke, I have studied with the greatest philosophers, and yet I feel I cannot touch your wisdom.”

She let out a laugh and wrapped her arms about his waist.

“I’m very wise too. I have had the opportunity of great reading and traveling and speaking with some of the most profound philosophers in Europe. Do not act as if I was shut up in a room somewhere and left with embroidery and dancing slippers.”

He let out a groan. “How remiss of me. Of course. And you had your grandmama to guide you, a woman who has been through many an ordeal.”

“Exactly,” she said. “But we each see the world differently. And what happens to us, well, it shapes us. But I knew that you were going to come out through the other side of this and go through life with me.”

“I do not know how you live life like that, my love,” he said softly.

“Say it again,” she breathed.

“My love,” he returned. “I haven’t truly said it yet, have I?”

She gave a quick shake of her head. “Indeed, you have not.”

“I love you, Agatha. I love you with my heart, with my soul, with every part of my being. I love you. Nothing can

shake that. Not the past. Not the fear of the future—”

And she lifted her finger then. “Ah, Your Grace,” she said. “Too much.”

“Too much?” he queried, his brow rising, shocked.

“Indeed,” she said gamely. “I am concerned with only one time in regard to your love.”

“And what is that?” he queried.

“Now. I wish you to love me now.”

And so, the duke tilted her head back and touched her lips with his. Ready to show her just how much he loved her now.

## EPILOGUE

Five Years Later

Grayson had never imagined that such happiness could exist.

He had not been able to contemplate the possibility of it for more than a decade. The revolution, war with France, Napoleon—all of it had prevented him from believing in happiness.

So many things had filled him with turmoil, from Admiral Nelson's death to Wellington in the field facing great odds, the problems at home, the death of all his living family. Well, it had taught him not to cling to happiness or to even think it would last if he snatched it for a moment.

But with Agatha, happiness was in every moment.

She saw the world like a jewel and could turn it so that the inner facets winked at the sun. It did not matter how difficult things were. And she had taught him how to see life that way too. And now she and he together had made beautiful jewels to shine through the world.

Their oldest child, Jean Pierre, played in the thick hedges, as agile as a fox.

Only four years old, the fellow knew how to sit, how to weave in and out of the branches, and how to contemplate the world as if it was his oyster.

Their younger child, Annabelle, bounced on the grass, pulling herself along, captivated by butterflies lingering on blades of grass.

A cardinal flew easily on the breeze and danced on the edge of the hedgerow. Its bright red plumage was a burst of joy. And then its mate came to sit beside it. Much duller in plumage but perfect in every way.

The two birds sang for a moment, and he knew in that moment that his path was unfolding exactly as it should.

This was a sign, a strange little sign, this perfect moment with his son playing, his daughter laughing at butterflies, her dark golden hair tumbling about her face. His wife beside him.

And the birds singing their song.

His soul knew ease, and he was at peace.

Agatha leaned her head against his shoulder as they sat on the earth contemplating their family. She placed her hand on her middle. “Another one,” she said. “Another jewel shall be born.”

He glanced down at her.

“Truly?” he said.

“We are making a family of our own, Grayson,” she replied, her eyes full of love. “One that will be full of joy and happiness, one which shall bring much love into the world to combat all the sorrow and suffering.”

He tilted her head up towards him. “I cannot wait to know them,” he said softly.

And the truth was he had not known real joy until the birth of his son and the birth of his daughter. Agatha had brought him deep love, but the family together had done something to him altogether different. It had made him feel at one with the world.

It had made him feel full, larger than life. Connected.

And when he looked up at the sky and saw the beautiful blue heaven and the golden orb shimmering in it, he understood that for all he had seen of the world that it had always been a place of love.

A place where Agatha’s love was waiting for him.

THE END



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Then, there's one exceptionally irritating lady, who keeps popping up at the oddest times, book in hand, spectacles on nose. Wildwood has no time for her, or so he tells his heart, but she just might teach him that vengeance will never give him the peace he needs. Yet, with the wall around his heart, can Wildwood choose love?

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But when a young lady at a house party proves infuriating and worse, captivating, Hartmore is shocked to learn she is the daughter of his sworn enemy. He knows he must stay away from her, but no matter how hard he resists, he cannot avoid her. Will she be a tool in his revenge or by chance, can she be the key to heal his heart?

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