

*A
Duke's
Christmas Secret*

BRIDGET BARTON

A Duke's Christmas Secret

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

BRIDGET BARTON

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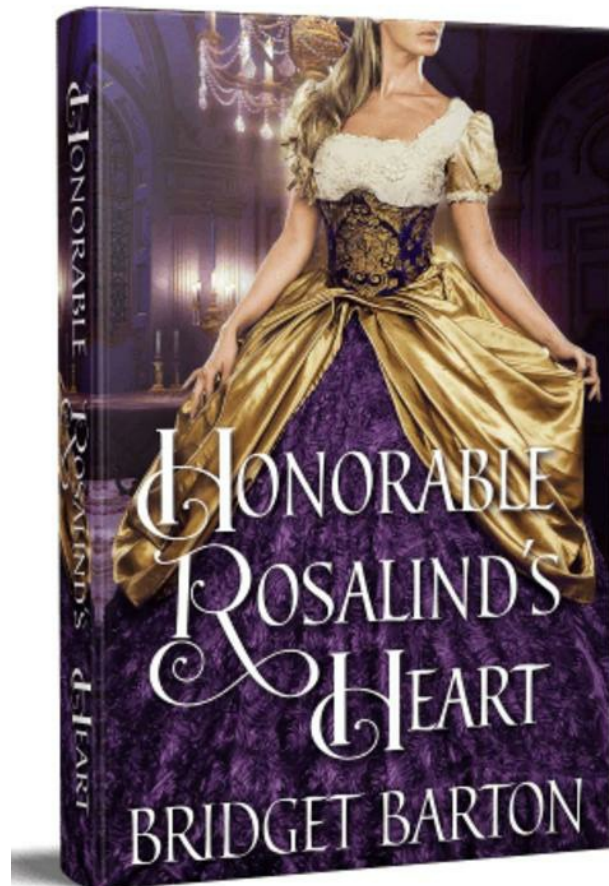
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A Duke's Christmas Secret

Introduction

In a world where duty and love clash, Lady Eleanor Robinson, a spirited young woman with a passion for adventure and a heart aching for true love, stands on the precipice of an impossible choice. Her father's financial woes have forced her into the arms of the insufferable Lord Henry Briarhurst, a man she could never love and yet has to marry by Christmas Day. An unexpected twist of fate brings the disowned Duke of Windhaven into her life for the Christmas holidays, leaving her torn between duty and her heart's secret yearning...

As the magic of Christmas draws near, will she discover a love worth fighting for or will she watch it slip through her fingers?

Nathaniel Margrave, the rightful Duke of Windhaven, returns to England with a heavy heart, seeking the inheritance that should have been his. Outcast by society and determined to reclaim what is owed, Nathaniel crosses paths with Lady Eleanor, an unexpected kindred spirit and the only thing that feels like Christmas magic. As he finds himself divided between the quest for his title and the irresistible pull of love, he is faced with a difficult decision.

Can he put his mission for vengeance aside for the promise of a love he never expected to find? Or will he walk away from it, leaving his heart forever torn?

As the holiday season unfurls, secrets unravel, and both Eleanor and Nathaniel must grapple with their desires and the truth about Nathaniel's stolen inheritance. Soon, they'll be faced with a heartbreaking decision that could forever separate them or bind them together in a love that defies all odds and becomes a Christmas miracle. Will their hearts find warmth in the cold of winter, or will their love be yet another casualty of the Christmas Season?

Chapter 1

London, 1815

“You will dance with as many handsome men as possible, will you not?”

“Bea.” Eleanor sighed tiredly with the words. “You do know that should not be your every desire when you are older.”

“Why not?”

Bea’s young face appeared in the hallway mirror behind Eleanor. Ten years her junior, Bea had reached her tenth summer a couple of months before, and her enthusiastic nature was growing by the day, especially when it came to talking of the *ton* or anything concerning Bea’s future life.

“I would dance with every man there if I could.” She took the ends of her skirt and turned around the rather sparse hallway, still managing to nearly bump into the one statue they had left in the room.

Eleanor chased after her younger sister, just managing to catch Bea's shoulders before such a collision could occur. Lovingly, she turned Bea around the other way so she could continue to dance in the opposite direction.

"I wish I had your optimism," Eleanor muttered under her breath, so quietly that Bea could not hear her over the happy tune she was humming.

With her hands on her hips, Eleanor moved toward the doorway, watching her sister as she chewed the inside of her mouth and continued to worry about the night ahead.

Tonight is the night. I must make something happen.

Eleanor took no love or happiness in her goal in life, even though she knew it was necessary. As the eldest, and now of marital age, it was her responsibility to try and secure a wealthy husband—a gentleman of standing in the *ton* who would be able to bring her father out of the pits of debt he had plunged them all into over the last decade.

Eleanor pressed her hands together, wringing them nervously as she looked around the room. Where once there had been great plinths with large marble busts of various scientists and reputed adventurers, there were now empty spaces.

Even the hallway mirror had been replaced with a wooden-framed one, a far cry from the gilt one that used to sit there. The one statue that remained in the hallway was evidently something her father was reluctant to part with.

The marble figure glittered in the last light of the autumnal day, the blood-orange light falling on it through the windows making the white face shine. The statue was of Marco Polo, a testament to his great adventures in the East and across Asia. Eleanor sighed as she looked at the statue, rather envying the freedom the man must have had, knowing he could leave his home life behind and begin such an adventure across the world.

If only the rest of us felt so free.

It wasn't something Eleanor could indulge in. As much as the idea of adventure and the world tempted her, she had responsibilities—and one of them was now dancing toward her again, in danger of bumping into the hall table. She took Bea's shoulders once more and spun her back the other way.

“Please be careful, Bea. If I come home to find you have knocked over all the furniture, I'll be taking care of you and your bruises for a week.”

“I'm not so bad.” Bea abruptly stopped and folded her arms, pouting firmly.

Her face wasn't dissimilar to Eleanor's, with the same pale blue eyes and

rounded cheeks, though on Bea, those curves had the tendency to look very young indeed. Eleanor's cheekbones were a touch more prominent, the slim peak of her chin delicate, and she had a fear that the angle made her lips look rather too full at times. They shared the same pale brown hair, so light that in certain weather it could almost look to be made of honey.

"Well, I am ready." Another voice joined them. "Let us get this over with."

"Father..." Eleanor offered a warning tone as her father appeared. The Earl of Wessex, Richard Robinson, was a shadow of the man he had once been.

Eleanor could remember that her father had once been dapper and handsome, full of life and energy, with swaths of golden hair swept back from his head and the same blue eyes that were found in his daughters' faces. These days, that blond hair was graying, and the eyes didn't glitter with life as much as they once did.

Yet as she watched him walk down the tiled steps of the house and hurry toward her, adjusting the cuffs of his jacket that he was evidently struggling with now that he no longer employed a valet, there was something Eleanor would be eternally grateful for

After her mother's death, Richard had dropped into despair, grief, and most particularly, brandy. For seven years, he had dwelled in such a dark place, his good humor fading and his hope in life dwindling with it.

The last three years, however, something had changed. Richard had picked himself up a little, determined to remedy their family's affairs, though it was no easy thing to do. His years of drinking and dwelling in misery had left them quite destitute.

"Here, let me," Eleanor whispered as her father stopped in front of her. She helped him adjust the cuffs of his tailcoat and then the cravat. "There. Very handsome, Father."

He smiled, the lines around his eyes crinkling a little more.

"I am sorry about this, Eleanor." He lowered his voice so only she could hear him as Bea was happily humming and dancing around the room again. "If I could think of another way, something more to do to help us all, I would do it. You know that, do you not?"

"I do." She forced a smile and flattened the lapels of his jacket for him. They had a tendency to stick up at odd angles. He needed a new tailcoat, but they couldn't waste money on such a thing. "Sometimes, life is about duty, is it not?" She tried to keep the sadness out of her voice. "I must accept that."

Her words didn't seem to help matters. He looked down between them, the shadows under his eyes appearing darker and worse than before.

“I’ll be happy, Father. Trust me. I’ll find a way.” She tried to show optimism, to reveal more hope than she truly felt.

To marry for love as my mother and father had done, that would be the true dream! Yet we are not all so fortunate.

Eleanor’s eyes darted to Bea as she reminded herself exactly why she was doing this, going on the hunt for a rich man. If she could marry well and secure the position of her family, then her father’s future would be safe, far from debtors’ prison, and Bea would have the opportunity to marry whoever she wished to in the future. Her opportunities would be completely open.

For Bea and my father, I must do this.

“Ah, my lord,” the butler called from the other end of the room. He stepped into the hall, and nearly colliding with Bea as she danced, he darted around her, appearing more sprightly than his elder years suggested. He smiled rather dotingly at Bea’s dancing and hurried toward Richard. “The carriage is prepared to take you to the Briarhurst Autumn Ball.”

“Many thanks, Garrison. What would I do without you, eh?” Richard clapped Garrison on the shoulder good-naturedly and offered his arm to Eleanor, ready to escort her to the ball.

Eleanor waved at Bea one last time and departed through the door, stepping out of the house and moving toward the carriage.

“Come back soon!” Bea called excitedly from the doorway behind her, where Garrison laid a gentle hand to her shoulder to stop her from leaping into the carriage, too. “I cannot wait to hear of the men you dance with.”

Eleanor and her father sighed together as they stepped into the carriage, sitting beside one another and staring forward. Neither of them said anything for a minute, but both forced smiles for Bea’s sake, waving at her through the window before the carriage pulled away down the drive.

Eleanor tried to concentrate on admiring the autumnal leaves, the rich hues of red and orange that danced in the evening breeze on the trees that flanked the driveway.

The Manor of Wessex had been their home for so long. If their finances dwindled until her father was forced to give it up, it would break him almost as much as losing her mother had done.

“By Christmas,” Richard said abruptly.

“I beg your pardon?” Eleanor turned to look at him, wondering if her father had been speaking and she had simply not been paying attention.

“I am thinking aloud.” He looked at her, his pointed chin downturned. “I have done some calculations, had a few more bills this morning from my debtors.”

“Oh.” Eleanor steeled herself, waiting for him to say more as she fidgeted restlessly with her reticule.

“By Christmas, I will not have the money to pay the interim bills. I’d have to sell the estate, and we may face...” He broke off, clearly not wanting to say the words “debtors’ prison.” “I am so sorry, Eleanor, but I fear we must get you wed by Christmas.”

“Christmas? So soon?” Yet Eleanor didn’t disagree or defy him. As she suspected, tonight had to be the night where she truly pushed things forward with Mr. Henry Briarhurst. If she stood a chance of saving her family, she had to persuade him to turn his offer of courtship into an offer of marriage.

God’s wounds, how on earth do I do that?

“What did you say?” Nathaniel stared at the solicitor, Mr. Thackery, certain he had heard him wrong.

Mr. Thackery grimaced behind the thick spectacles he wore, his great gray eyes appearing twice as large as they truly were. The effect was rather like that of a large puppy, staring at Nathaniel with a pleading gaze. He handed over the will for Nathaniel to look at himself.

“I wish I could say it was something else, but it cannot be denied. The proof is there before our eyes.”

Nathaniel tried to block out the stuffy solicitor’s room as he snatched up the will and looked down at the words before him. It was the kind of room he detested, the sort he had been all too happy to leave behind when he had turned his back on England five years ago and left for the Americas.

Full of dark mahogany with closed windows, the corners were shadowy, the ornaments on the desk and above the mantelpiece overly ostentatious, and the Wedgewood pottery that littered the tea tray in front of him felt far too prim and proper.

Nathaniel read the words of his brother’s will, disbelief filling him all the more.

When the letter had first arrived informing him of David's death after a sudden sickness, Nathaniel hadn't hesitated to book his place on the soonest ship and return home.

He had not wanted to believe it, refused to do so, yet when he had attempted to reach the family home, he found the driveway blocked and he was refused entry by workmen who declared he was not the master of the house. Angered to not be able to visit his own home, he had had to come to the solicitor to find out the truth of all that had passed.

The letter about his brother's passing had initially been delayed; poor David had actually passed four months prior. In that time, his will had been executed, the funeral held, and Nathaniel had not been invited.

"You are telling me that I have missed my brother's passing, his funeral, and now, I have nothing to remember him or the family by? Nothing at all?" Nathaniel asked in disbelief, reading the words again.

"I wish I could say something else, but I cannot," Mr. Thackery declared with a rather withering and simpering voice that left Nathaniel disgruntled. It irked him almost as much as Mr. Thackery's incessant bowing had done when he first entered the room. "This will arrived with a letter when your brother was dying, in which he expressed his clear wishes for me to execute the will. Your family lands and fortune have been left elsewhere, Your Grace."

“Hmm.” Nathaniel said nothing, reading the will one more time.

I, the present Duke of Windhaven, David Musgrave, being of sound mind, leave my estate to my dearest friend of many years, Mr. Henry Briarhurst.’

The will went on in the greatest of details, saying how Mr. Briarhurst had earned the fortune due to his loyalty to the family and to David. These words most of all felt like a kick in Nathaniel’s gut.

I thought David understood me. I thought in our letters, we were at last seeing eye to eye.

Nathaniel was realizing now how mistaken he had been. After the cloud under which he had left the family home five years ago and headed to the Americas, much had changed. Where David had once agreed with their parents, his latest letters had suggested to Nathaniel that he understood him much more, and that maybe when Nathaniel returned to England, they could start again as brothers.

Clearly, I was mistaken. He has not left me a penny.

Nathaniel turned the pages of the will, checking each and every item in the hope that David would leave him something—a book from the library that he

had adored so much, or a single plant from that beautiful garden—but it was not to be. He was given nothing from his family at all, nothing to remember them by.

“All my family’s heirlooms, everything from the dukedom, it is to belong to Mr. Briarhurst?” Nathaniel asked in disbelief, lowering the will to his lap as he sat in the rigid-backed armchair.

It was uncomfortable, nothing like the plush and comfy chairs he had grown accustomed to sitting in the last few years. He supposed Mr. Thackery didn’t choose his chairs for comfort, but those that he probably thought made him look grander, and more suited to a higher class of clientele.

“Not everything, Your Grace.” Mr. Thackery clasped his hands together on the desk between them. “Your title is yours. No duke can be disinherited from that. It is enshrined in law, from the days where such titles were thought to be ordained by God through the king. You are the next Duke of Windhaven.”

I am not sure I wish for that part.

Nathaniel kept his thoughts to himself. Of all the things to inherit, he was getting the one thing that felt stuffy and haughty. He would have been glad to get his brother’s lands, to check on the tenants for himself and see how they were faring. That would have been a better responsibility than an empty title.

“I should thank you for seeing me.” Nathaniel stood and buttoned the loose gray jacket he wore, all too aware that Mr. Thackery’s large eyes narrowed through his glasses. He seemed to be staring at Nathaniel’s attire with wonder.

I know what he’s thinking. A duke should dress in a grander way.

The mere idea of defying convention made Nathaniel smile a little.

“Thank you for taking the time to explain everything to me,” he said as Mr. Thackery stood, too.

“I am only sorry I could not give you fairer news, Your Grace. Mr. Briarhurst has left a letter for you, to be read upon your return.” He proffered forward a sealed envelope, the red wax seal shining up in the fading light of the day.

Nathaniel took the letter rather hurriedly, relieved to see Mr. Briarhurst was not using Nathaniel’s family seal. Mr. Briarhurst had everything else, he didn’t need that as well.

Dear Nathaniel...

He broke off at once and looked up. There was a time when Mr. Briarhurst had been almost an older brother to Nathaniel, for he and David had been inseparable, keeping each other company at gentlemen's clubs and various gambling halls in town.

At the time, they had all been on first-name terms, but there was something now about Mr. Briarhurst addressing him in such a way that felt wrong, as if Nathaniel had been struck down in some boxing match.

Please believe me when I say that these circumstances were not expected by me or any other. I dearly hope that the wishes of your brother will not sow discord between us. In fact, when you do return, please know that my townhouse is always open to you. Come to the Briarhurst estate in London, in Piccadilly, whenever you can. I would be glad of your company, and very happy indeed to toast the name of your brother with you.

Nathaniel lowered the letter, feeling a sudden determination to see Mr. Briarhurst after all.

"I hope it is of some use to you?" Mr. Thackery said, gesturing down to the letter.

"Oh, it is." For Nathaniel had noticed something in the letter, something that now niggled away at him, as if ants were crawling over his skin. The letter

was dated from before the letter that even told Nathaniel his brother was dead in the first place. Mr. Briarhurst had been informed very early indeed of what fortune was soon to be his. “It seems I have something to ask Mr. Briarhurst. I will visit him at once.”

He nodded his head at Mr. Thackery, and the solicitor bowed flamboyantly.

Nathaniel left the room, his nose wrinkling with distaste at the sheer extent of that bow. If he had his way, no man would bow to a duke or any other who claimed to have a title again.

Chapter 2

“Enjoy yourself quickly before he calls you to his side again.” Lady Sophie Runswick, the daughter of the Countess of Aylesbury, passed a plate of small cakes into Eleanor’s hand. “Hurry, hurry, he is already coming this way again.”

“Oh, calm down, Sophie.” Lady Linora, daughter of a marquess, laughed and placed a comforting hand on Eleanor’s arm. “He is hardly so demanding.”

“You think not?” Eleanor spluttered, not bothering to eat the cake. “Have you not heard him speak? He is a domineering man indeed!”

“You are the one who agreed to court him,” Linora said carefully with a wince. In unison, both Eleanor and Sophie glared at her. “Was that the wrong time to point that out?”

“What was your first clue?” Eleanor said in a wry tone, prompting Sophie to laugh heartily.

Since she had arrived at Mr. Henry Briarhurst’s Autumn Ball, she had been practically glued to his side. Each time she had attempted to step away for a

moment's breathing space, he'd take hold of her wrist or her waist and pull her back again.

"It's almost as if you are already married," Sophie mused with a whisper. She nudged Eleanor with her elbow, clearly warning her that Mr. Briarhurst was marching their way once again.

Well, I suppose I should be happy about such a thing.

Eleanor didn't reply. Tonight had all been about persuading Mr. Briarhurst to make that offer of marriage. They had been courting for the last few weeks, yet the more Eleanor was in his company, the more reluctant she was to push him into such a conversation.

She didn't like him very much. In truth, she had serious questions about his character, finding him rather demanding, not to mention he made her uncomfortable any time he placed his hand on her possessively. She supposed he was handsome, in the sort of dandy way where a man wore far too much decoration on his fine clothes, but each time she tried to find some fondness for him, her heart failed her.

"Why Mr. Briarhurst?" Linora asked, elbowing her from the other side.

"What?" Eleanor looked at her, startled by the question.

“Of all men, Eleanor. I know you are eager to marry, and he has just inherited a vast fortune, after all, but why him?” Linora wrinkled her nose. “You are as ill-matched as cheese and mint sauce.”

Both Eleanor and Sophie exchanged disgusted looks at the idea.

“Cheese and mint sauce?” Sophie repeated with a laugh. “Have you ever tried such a thing?”

“Why would one?”

As Sophie and Linora fell into a rather humorous conversation, Eleanor looked away. She loved her friends dearly, and their good humor usually had the habit of cheering her spirits. Sophie, the more elegant of the two, had long blonde hair that was cascaded in perfect curls.

She received attention from a lot of men but batted them away frequently, showing little interest in marrying at all as of yet. In contrast, Linora’s beauty was much darker, with rich black hair and dark chestnut eyes that had almost as many men following her. She knew the marriage market well and was being very careful about who she chose to court.

By contrast, Eleanor didn't have such choice.

Why Mr. Briarhurst, she asks me? Does she truly not know?

"I had no choice," Eleanor said suddenly.

"What was that?" Linora asked, breaking off her conversation with Sophie and turning to face her.

"You asked me why I chose Mr. Briarhurst? Well, I didn't. Not exactly." Eleanor shook her head. "He chose me. My first two Seasons, I fear I frightened too many men away with all my talk of books. I am told no man wants such a thing. Mr. Briarhurst is the only man to ever show an interest. That is why I am courting him."

"But..." Linora looked ready to argue the idea, but Sophie coughed rather loudly, and the three of them whipped around to see Mr. Briarhurst had at last reached them through the busy crowd of the ballroom.

Wherever Eleanor looked, the room was alive with hot air and chatter. Ladies laughed and waved fans in front of their faces as gentlemen guffawed and passed around thick glasses of brandy and claret. The dancers at the far end of the room were in such a state of joy that when couples collided, they

merely laughed it off and continued on.

Their host seemed just as happy as his guests. His wide lips spread wider still as he looked at Eleanor and offered his hand to her, his rather pale pallor reminding her of the sallow skin of a lamb.

“Ah, Lady Eleanor, there you are. Come, come, there are some gentlemen I would like you to meet.” He urged her to follow him so abruptly that she nearly dropped her plate and was only saved from disaster as Linora and Sophie scrambled to catch it from the air.

“Our poor friend,” Sophie’s whisper followed Eleanor as she trailed along at Mr. Briarhurst’s side.

“I think you will enjoy meeting these gentlemen,” he said in what she supposed was his attempt at a soft tone. “They are advantageous men indeed to meet.”

She forced a smile, understanding what he actually wanted out of this endeavor. These must be men of business, men of success, and just like every other introduction he had made that night, he was introducing her in order to show her off. As the daughter of an earl, she had a good reputation, and the link to aristocracy was evidently something that Mr. Briarhurst craved.

“There you are, my good men.” Mr. Briarhurst led her to the center of the room, where they stood beneath a vast chandelier, full of candles that glittered between the crystal decorations. “May I present the young lady I am courting. This is Lady Eleanor Robinson, daughter of the Earl of Wessex.” The fact he added her father’s title only reinforced what Eleanor had already suspected was the reason for the introduction.

The three gentlemen before her all bowed deeply as she curtsied. She was quickly introduced to them all in turn and learned one was an investment banker, another a trader in the east, and the final man was a viscount, with particularly extensive lands in Cumbria.

“What a transformation, eh, Briarhurst?” the portly investment banker asked after the introductions were finished. He raised his claret to his lips, his fingers and his cheeks practically the color of the wine he gulped. “A year ago, you were but a man of business. Now you have great lands, tenants, and a fine woman indeed on your arm.”

He nodded his head at Eleanor with these words, though she felt disgusted by it, even as she struggled to hold her smile in place. *I am spoken of as if I am some prize pig at a village fair.*

“Yes, it has been a fortunate year indeed.” Mr. Briarhurst smiled at her indulgently, then his eyes looked over her. Her body stiffened. How could he feel so at ease to gaze at her in such a fashion?

“A toast, then.” The viscount raised his glass in the air. “To your future success, Briarhurst. May the next year be as good as the last.”

The four men all chinked their glasses together as Eleanor looked sharply at Mr. Briarhurst behind her. It struck her that this man had indeed faced sadness this last year. He had lost his dearest friend in the world. She’d heard much of it, from him and what she had read in the scandal sheets. Yet the late Duke of Windhaven was not mentioned now.

I suppose Mr. Briarhurst deals with his grief by choosing not to talk of it.

As the men all lowered their glasses, and the banker started a conversation about the many ladies Mr. Briarhurst had invited tonight, Eleanor stepped away a little but Mr. Briarhurst moved with her. She could not go anywhere without him following.

“Ah.” Mr. Briarhurst froze with his glass halfway raised to his lips. He looked across the room, over the banker’s head, to the double doors.

Eleanor strained at his side to see what had made him go so rigid. His sallow skin seemed even paler than before now, the hue of milk.

“Are you well, sir?” she whispered beside him, her eyes tracing his dark auburn hair that was slicked back with rather too much wax.

He didn't answer her but continued to stare over the rim of his glass. It was as if he had seen a ghost.

Eleanor peered past the banker's shoulder, at last succeeding in seeing what had stunned him so much. There was a gentleman standing in the doorway she didn't recognize, a man who was clearly having an effect on many in the crowded ballroom as people turned and pointed his way.

It was rather like a stone being plunged into a calm lake, the ripples casting outward. Heads turned, whispers began, and the man who was the cause of it all stood stock still. The only thing that moved were his eyes, darting around the room.

Eleanor stared at him too, taking in his appearance. He was not dressed for a ball but wore a dark gray suit with a slim-fitting waistcoat that accented a rather athletic build and broader shoulders that were not often found in the *ton*. His dark hair curled at his temples, untouched by wax. On his chin was a little stubble.

He had not bothered to shave or to grow a heavily manicured beard and sideburns, as so many men did, including Mr. Briarhurst beside her. Perhaps the most distinctive difference of this stranger was the hue of his skin. He was tanned, as if he had spent long hours out under the sun. It was such a contrast to Mr. Briarhurst that Eleanor's eyes danced over the gentleman, drinking in the sight of him.

“Excuse me.” Mr. Briarhurst left Eleanor’s side willingly for the first time that night, loosening their arms. He crossed the room toward the man and clapped him on the shoulder, surprising him so much that this tall gentleman jerked his head toward Mr. Briarhurst.

Finding the three men before her were now all staring, agog, at the exchange, Eleanor took her chance to escape. She hurried back across the room to the drinks’ table, where Sophie was grabbing another glass of champagne.

“Ah, this must interest you, Eleanor,” Linora said knowingly, nodding her head across the room. When Eleanor offered a puzzled look, Sophie pressed the glass into her hand and took another, chuckling to herself. Eleanor didn’t bother to drink it.

“You know Linora. She knows everyone in the *ton*, not to mention their friends, their grandmothers, and their third cousins once removed.”

“I am not that bad,” Linora insisted, flicking her head around so sharply that the loose dark wisps hanging down from her updo whipped her own ears.

“You know everyone,” Sophie insisted. “And all their business, too. How many scandal sheets are stuffed under your pillow right now?”

Instead of answering, Linora rolled her eyes and looked across the room at the exchange between Mr. Briarhurst and the incomer.

“Linora, I will never scoff at you for your superior knowledge of the *ton*,” Eleanor assured her. “In fact, I am more than intrigued to make use of it now. Tell me, who is that? Clearly, I owe him a debt of gratitude. He is the first man to make Mr. Briarhurst leave my side all night.”

“He is the man I think most people least expected to be here,” Linora said, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. Eleanor and Sophie stepped closed to hear her, so near that Sophie was in danger of tipping her champagne glass over and Linora had to grab the base to stop it from happening. “That there is the new Duke of Windhaven.”

“I beg your pardon?” Eleanor spun around so fast she nearly knocked the already precarious glass out of Sophie’s hand.

“Between the three of us, I think we’re in danger of destroying all of Mr. Briarhurst’s crystalware this evening,” Sophie said with a laugh.

Eleanor was no longer paying attention. She was staring at the new Duke of Windhaven across the room, stunned at the man before her. He was hardly what she had expected. Mr. Briarhurst had only mentioned once in passing before that his late friend had a younger brother who would inherit the title

but not the fortune. The rather cold and icy look this gentleman was now bestowing on Mr. Briarhurst spoke volumes.

“They hardly look like the best of friends, do they?” Eleanor whispered.

“Are you surprised?” Linora snorted into her glass.

“Strangely, Linora, we are not all as up-to-date on the gossip as you are. Care to inform us lesser mortals?” Sophie said, elbowing her on.

“Very well. That there is Nathaniel Musgrave. It’s rumored he left the family home under something of a cloud five years ago. They say he intended to steal the fortune from under their father’s nose. He was wrapped across the knuckles for it and has been in the Americas ever since, swindling other unsuspecting men out of their fortunes,” Linora said, her tone horror-filled.

“You’d think a trickster with such success could afford a finer suit, Linora,” Eleanor pointed out, rather pleased with her own perceptiveness as Linora and Sophie both squinted at the duke across the room.

“Well, I suppose you are right,” Linora whispered. “Anyway, it was a great scandal a few months ago when the late Duke of Windhaven died, for as you know, he left everything to his friend. The two country homes, the estates, the tenants, every painting, every handkerchief, all of it went to Mr. Briarhurst.

His brother was left with nothing but the title. After all, a man cannot be disinherited of his title, or they say he would have lost that, too.”

“He must have done something very bad indeed to have upset the family so much,” Sophie murmured.

“Stealing a fortune? That is awful, Sophie,” Eleanor said with sudden passion. “No wonder he has been unwelcome for so long.” Her gaze lingered on the Duke of Windhaven as he spoke with Mr. Briarhurst. Even as the latter smiled and seemed rather eager to engage the duke in conversation, the former gentleman’s eyes continued to narrow. “There’s an iciness to him,” she whispered, as her friends nodded. “Oh no.”

Mr. Briarhurst had turned and was beckoning to Eleanor across the room.

“Your man wants you,” Sophie said with a giggle. “Good lord, he’s demanding. You’d think you were his favorite actress on the stage, come to perform at his whim. Off you go, little actress, perform to your very best.”

“Do me a favor and swap places with me?” Eleanor said with fervor to her friends. Both shook their heads firmly. “Ah, shame. If only.”

When Mr. Briarhurst waved at her even more sharply than before, she was left with little choice. Steeling herself and holding her spine straight, she

slowly crossed the room toward the two gentlemen. The closer she grew to the pair of them, the more she found her eyes dwelling on the Duke of Windhaven.

If he was some trickster, some awful swindler, she would have to be careful indeed. Her father was in enough debt as it was, and becoming acquainted with such a man as this could prove costly indeed. She resolved at once to keep a good distance between herself and this man, seeing little good that could come of it.

“Ah, there you are,” Mr. Briarhurst said to her with a tone of surprise as she reached his side, as if he hadn’t been beckoning her madly from across the room with his hand buffeting like the wings of a butterfly. “May I introduce to you the young lady I am courting. This is Lady Eleanor, daughter of the Earl of Wessex.”

Used to the formal introduction by now, Eleanor curtsied.

“Eleanor.” The fact Mr. Briarhurst dropped her title made her shoulders flinch back, startled and irked at the familiarity of it. “This is the Duke of Windhaven, younger brother to my late dear friend.”

The duke bowed deeply and stood straight, his dark eyes finding Eleanor’s. When she looked him in the eye, she found it rather hard to look away. There was that same cool iciness that she had observed across the room now up close, but to her relief, he didn’t simper like the other men did around Mr.

Briarhurst, nor did he force a smile or put on any false and flamboyant airs. Instead, he looked straight at her.

Now she was this close, she could see a mark upon his right cheek. It was as if he had been cut by some blade, and it stretched from the crest of his cheek down to his jaw, the white mark shining in the candlelight.

Oh, how inconvenient.

Being this near, Eleanor had to admit something to herself. Even with that scar, the Duke of Windhaven was very handsome indeed. In fact, he was perhaps the most handsome gentleman in the room.

Chapter 3

“A fine woman, is she not?” Mr. Briarhurst asked, gesturing to the young lady before him.

Lady Eleanor looked abashed at the words. She turned her head away, the tall crests of her cheeks blushing crimson red.

At least she has some humility in her.

Nathaniel was struggling to concentrate on anything at this moment. Arriving at Briarhurst’s home to find a ball in full swing was hardly what he had expected, and he was now wrong-footed entirely, finding he couldn’t have the open discussion that he wished to.

“Please, sir,” Lady Eleanor said quietly at Mr. Briarhurst’s side. “Your friend has not come here to talk about me.”

Nathaniel didn’t deny it. She was beautiful, even distractingly so. She had honey-brown hair with streaks that appeared gold in this candlelight, and her light blue eyes were rather penetrating. The full lips were what Nathaniel found the most interesting. They set her apart from others. As opposed to the

ordinary beauty of the *ton*, the kind often recreated in paintings on the walls of places like Somerset Gallery, she was much more unique.

Yet Nathaniel hadn't come here to gaze at a woman's beauty, nor to talk of her courtship with Mr. Briarhurst, which he didn't doubt the man wished to crow about.

"I trust you are well, Your Grace." Lady Eleanor curtsied to him. "I hear you have recently returned from the Americas. You must have had some journey."

"Yes, a great journey." He barely answered her properly, shifting his focus back to Briarhurst. She was an unwelcome diversion now. He would be glad to be rid of her so he could deal with Briarhurst alone.

"And you are to stay in England for some time?" She plainly attempted once more to secure him in conversation, one that did not interest him.

"We shall see," he answered noncommittally, never once shifting his gaze from Briarhurst. This man had everything that by right should have belonged to Nathaniel. It was his, his bloodline's belongings, not Briarhurst's. "I would like to stay in my family home in Sussex."

"Ah, that will not be possible, I am afraid," Briarhurst said hurriedly. "The

place is being renovated at present.”

“So I discovered.”

The news that Nathaniel had evidently been to the house made Briarhurst shift his weight between his feet and pull at his collar, apparently suffering some heat in the room, though Nathaniel wondered if it had more to do with the narrowed glare he was giving.

“You are more than welcome to stay for the ball, though,” Briarhurst said hurriedly. “I would be glad to have you here. We can toast your brother’s memory.”

“It is my brother and his wishes I intended to talk to you about.” Nathaniel didn’t blink as he watched Briarhurst, feeling rather like a bird of prey as he glared at the man. One false move, one hint of guilt, and Nathaniel would jump on it.

Why do I feel as if there is something so wrong about my brother’s bequest? There is something I am missing, something I do not know. I must discover everything that happened before David passed.

“Surely you see that this evening is not the event for it,” Briarhurst said with ease and gestured to the room. “You must come and visit me soon, and we

shall discuss it in great detail. Though forgive me if I am rather busy at present and in the coming days.” He gestured to the lady beside him.

Nathaniel’s eyes shot to her.

Did she flinch?

She smiled, yet the lines around her lips became rather taut, and Nathaniel couldn’t help suspecting that it was a forced smile.

Briarhurst pulled her closer into his side, and she didn’t move away.

They do not match.

The thought struck Nathaniel suddenly. He hardly cared who Briarhurst intended to choose for a wife, but when being faced with a woman as beautiful as this, as well composed, it was evident that the two did not fit together. Briarhurst had a rather sickly look to him, with an extensively manicured auburn beard and sideburns that made him look much older than he was. The lady beside him could have turned her attention on any other man in the room and found one more than eager to have her attention.

“But please, do stay for the ball,” Briarhurst said again, gesturing to the room. “I would be glad to have you here with us.”

“Would you?” Nathaniel asked, his voice rather tight. Lady Eleanor’s eyes shot to him, but Briarhurst didn’t seem to notice the shift in his tone.

“Of course.” Briarhurst laughed warmly. “I’m delighted to host your first event back with us in London. Drink, eat, be merry. Even dance if the liking takes you. Speaking of which, if you would excuse me, I have neglected the lady at my side for far too long now.” He offered her his hand and she took it woodenly.

“Let us dance, Lady Eleanor.” He towed the lady away, who offered another one of those tight-lipped smiles. As they walked off, something strange happened.

Nathaniel’s eyes drifted down the lady’s gown. Even as he persuaded himself that meeting Mr. Briarhurst’s sweetheart did not affect him, he was admiring the cut of the pale blue gown, the way it was cinched at her waist, and the delicacy of her neckline and collarbone. She turned back to look at him over her shoulder, and their eyes connected.

What does that mean, my lady?

It was momentary, and she turned away again, led toward the dance floor.

“He has too many hands,” Eleanor muttered to herself as she at last managed to escape Mr. Briarhurst again. She had lost count of how many times he had danced with her that evening. Clearly, he was trying to send a message to everyone else in the room. He might as well have written his name in ink across her forehead, and it would have made just as clear a statement.

“I must contend with this. I must,” she muttered as she slipped between the groups of people, feeling overheated. She had been here for far too long and only managed a handful of conversations with Linora and Sophie all night. Now tired, both of pretending to enjoy Mr. Briarhurst’s advances and from dancing for so long, she sought out her father.

She found him at the edge of the room, having just finished a conversation with an old friend. She was relieved to see her father had at least enjoyed himself and had a pleasant smile on his face as she reached his side.

“Ah, a successful evening indeed,” he whispered to her. “Do you know, I do not think Mr. Briarhurst looked at another lady all night?”

“No. I do not think he did either,” Eleanor said with rather more

disappointment and blew a loose wisp of hair out of her eyes. “Let us leave, Father, please. If I have to dance again with him, I’ll be worn out.”

“Very well.” Her father chuckled. “Yet we must wait for another first to join us.”

“Another?” Eleanor looked around in panic. Surely her father had not invited Mr. Briarhurst to stay with them? It would be mad to think he could leave his ball now. Besides, she and her father had made a concerted effort to avoid drawing Mr. Briarhurst to the house, in case he realized just how far their fortunes had dwindled.

“Who, Father? Surely you do not mean...” She trailed off, nervous of being overheard as a group of ladies passed by.

“Who?” her father asked, clearly confused by her question.

Before she could make a concerted effort to press her father as to the identity of their visitor, a voice called to him.

“Lord Wessex. I must thank you again for this.”

The deep and sonorous tone made Eleanor whip her head around in alarm. Walking toward them was none other than the Duke of Windhaven, with the thick frock coat he had collected from the butler slung over his arm. He didn't carry a top hat in his other hand, as many other men would have done, but a wider-brimmed and lower-lying hat made of black beaver felt.

He bowed to her father in greeting. "It is a kindness indeed."

Eleanor blinked, looking between her father and the Duke of Windhaven in shock.

"Ah, Eleanor. Have you had the pleasure yet of being introduced to the duke?" Her father gestured toward the man just as those dark eyes slid toward her.

"Briefly, earlier this evening," she said in a rush. She cleared her throat, hoping to buy enough time to clear her thoughts. "Forgive me, Your Grace, I am confused. Are we giving you a lift somewhere?"

The duke smiled a little, almost a smirk of amusement as he looked at her father.

"I have invited the Duke of Windhaven to stay with us while he is in England," her father said off-handedly as he turned and lowered his voice to

the butler who had appeared, asking for their carriage to be brought around.

“I beg your pardon?” Eleanor said hurriedly and quietly.

“I am to be your house guest, my lady.” The duke bowed his head to her again. “Your father has been most generous to offer your house for the next month as I am in London.”

“A month?” she repeated.

No, no. This cannot be happening.

“Ah, the carriage is here already. Come, Eleanor. Let us get you home. I am hardly surprised you are tired after all that dancing.” Her father took her arm and led her through the doorway, though she looked back the entire time at the duke, struggling to order her thoughts.

“Yes, Mr. Briarhurst scarcely let you sit,” the duke muttered, looking away as if he was not aware that she was paying any attention to what he said.

Eleanor walked out of the house and down the front steps, clinging to her father’s arm rather tightly and wishing she could whisper in his ear all of her

worries. It seemed the trickster, the Duke of Windhaven, had already found his next target. Her father had so little money to spare that if he fell for any of the duke's lies and games, it could be the end of their family for good.

As they reached the carriage, she stepped inside, followed by her father and the duke, who both sat opposite her.

"Well, while you are staying with us, Your Grace, I'd be delighted to hear more about your travels." Her father rubbed his hands together excitedly as the carriage lurched forward, making the lantern that was attached to the roof above them swing back and forth. It cast orange light and shadows around the space, sometimes falling on the duke's chiseled features and making him look more a man of shadows and darkness than light at all.

"I'd be happy to share the stories with you. I must confess myself surprised by your offer," the duke said, seemingly with care. "You must have noted in that room, most people wished to avoid me."

"I do not trouble myself with such things as gossip or rumor." Her father laughed at the idea, waving it off. "I'd rather learn about a man myself than believe such things."

Yet Eleanor knew there was another reason behind this statement. Her own father had been the subject of such whispers for many years because of his drinking as the fortune dwindled further and further. He would never be the first to cast aspersions against any other man who had fallen on hard times. It

was a testament to her father's goodness and his benevolence of heart that he chose not to believe any of the rumors around him.

As her father engaged the duke in conversation about the ball, Eleanor said nothing. She was on her guard, watching the duke warily as if he were a tiger disguised amongst cats.

Whatever his aim with my father, whatever trick or deception he is hoping to pull, he will not succeed. Of that, I will make certain.

"Father?" Eleanor had her hands on her hips as she stepped into her father's study.

So many times over the years had she found him in this same position, sat in the wing-backed armchair beside his fire, staring at the flames. Above the mantelpiece was a portrait of him and his late wife, Emily.

It was a fine portrait indeed, a happy one, and for many years her father had drunk himself into a stupor as he sat beneath it, his fingers trembling around brandy and port glasses until the carafes shook in his grasp and ended upturned on the nearby hearth rug, toppling over the fire screens. These days, he avoided liquor entirely.

Tonight, she found him in the same chair, but as he looked at the portrait above him, it was with a half-content smile. These days, he remembered the past with a fondness, rather than a longing that crippled him. In his grasp was a cup and saucer, hot tea steaming from inside.

“Ah, Eleanor.” He looked up from his tea with a smile and gestured for her to come in. “I think tonight was a great success, you know.” The smile grew slightly uneasy. “If things were different, if we did not have to be so... well, you now.”

She sat opposite him, perching on the edge of the other armchair. “If we could be less underhanded?” she offered, making her father grimace at the words.

“I have never lied to Mr. Briarhurst—at least there’s that in my favor. He has not enquired about your dowry directly, so I have no reason to believe he is interested in you for money’s sake. In fact, I believe it to be genuine affection.” His smile grew once again. “I only wish you felt the same way.”

Eleanor looked away into the fire. This was not what she had come to her father to discuss but now they were talking of it, she was left feeling small, with her stomach knotted.

“Affection can grow in time, I know that,” she whispered, watching the flames dance as they licked the coals. “Do not despair for my sake, Father.”

“You know I do.” He ran a hand across his face in stress. “If I had been less of a failure in my last years on this earth, I would not be the thing that had driven you to this.” He leaned forward and laid his hand over hers, the skin around his eyes crinkling once again. He looked older to her all of a sudden, the blue of his eyes a little paler in the strange light of the fire. “I cannot apologize to you enough.”

“Please, do not,” she pleaded. “I do not ask for your apology.”

“Yet you have come here to ask for something.” He leaned back and gestured to her with his teacup. “What have you come to say, Eleanor? You were so tired you did not say a word on the carriage ride home. What is it you wish to discuss?”

“Your guest.” Eleanor’s tone was tight and clipped. “What possessed you to invite a man such as him into our midst?”

“Such as him? Do you know him, Eleanor? Or are these things you have learned from that gossiping friend of yours?”

“Linora just repeats what she hears. There is no malice in it.” At her words,

her father quirked his eyebrow. “She has a good heart.”

“I know she does, but one cannot deny that sometimes the gossip-sharers do as much harm as those who are the source of it all. A few years ago, your friend would have talked as much of me.”

Eleanor looked away, into the fire.

“Even so...” She paused, breathing deeply, trying to be calm. It would be the only way to get through to her father. “Perhaps we should be wary of the Duke of Windhaven. If even there is the slimmest of truth to the gossip, the idea that he could be some deceiver, a man out to con others from their wealth, we hardly have much to spare. Are you certain it is wise to have a house guest at this time?”

“I see you have listened to the gossip and believed it all.”

“You are not taking me seriously.”

“Calm yourself, dear, please.” He sat forward, his face softening. “I talked to the Duke of Windhaven tonight. In fact, I saw something in him that I recognized as he stood alone with a brandy glass in his hand.”

“What is that?” Eleanor asked.

“Isolation.” The simple word made Eleanor sit taller, startled by it. “I approached him and engaged him in conversation, choosing to ignore all the whispers I heard. I have reason to believe that maybe what money the gentleman has amassed is not from deception at all but sound business investments.

If I am right in my judgment, then he might be able to assist me in making good investments myself in the Americas. Now, if there is the chance of recouping some of our fortune without having to see you in a loveless marriage, is that not worth a try?”

“Father...” she whispered, uncertain what more to say. Her father had invited such a man into their house for her, to try to protect her.

“Remember this.” He sat forward once more. “I am still the head of this household, and for now, it is my responsibility to protect you and Bea. Even if for many years I did an ashamedly poor job of it. Give me one last chance to come true.” He patted her hand. “Let me try this. Then maybe we will not have to see you married by Christmas after all.”

As kind an intention as it was, Eleanor didn’t trust the man who had crossed the threshold of their house that evening. For all that Eleanor knew she shouldn’t listen to gossip, her fear for her father was greater than her rational

mind in that moment. She could question who the duke truly was at heart later, but for now, she had to put her father first.

Even as her father tried to protect her, Eleanor made a vow to herself. She would try to protect him first, and she would do anything it took. Perhaps going as far as to monopolize the Duke of Windhaven's time to make sure he couldn't get near her father at all.

Chapter 4

“A tour?” Nathaniel looked up from his place at the breakfast table, startled by the offer made by Lady Eleanor from the other side of the table.

He had been calmly reading the newspaper Lord Wessex was kind enough to offer him, listening to the two of them talk about the house and the events of the autumn months in the run-up to Christmas. Nathaniel had looked more than once at the other place setting at the table, awaiting another to join them. He understood in passing that Lady Eleanor had a younger sister, but for some reason, this sister hadn't yet appeared.

“Yes.” Lady Eleanor sat forward. “I would be glad to offer you a tour of the house and estate this morning, if you should wish to see it.”

It was the most the lady had yet said to him. Nathaniel folded up the paper and put it down beside his plate, rather wondering at the aim of her offer. Easily, a tour was something that could be undertaken by the butler or the housekeeper. Yet now he thought of it, he was not sure he had seen a housekeeper. Perhaps they didn't have one? The household didn't seem to have a lot of staff.

“A tour sounds a good idea,” Lord Wessex said convivially from the head of the table. “In the meantime, I can try and hunt out my youngest daughter. For

the life of me, I do not know where she has gone.” He turned to look at the butler, who was walking around them, topping up their cups with coffee. “Garrison, have you seen Bea this morning?”

“Last I saw her, she was declaring to be a maiden trapped on wild moors as she ran across her bedroom, with good Mrs. Turnpike running after her insisting she dressed.” Garrison’s description made them all smile, even Nathaniel. “I think Mrs. Turnpike had a job of chasing her down.”

“That sounds like Bea,” Lady Eleanor said with the first genuine smile that Nathaniel had seen on her. That smile changed something in her countenance, and he looked at her rather more than he should have done. Her full lips lifted and there was a lightness in her eyes that hadn’t been there at all the night before.

“I shall endeavor to steal some of your time too while you are here, Your Grace,” Lord Wessex said beside him. “I’d be glad to pick your brain about the Americas and the trading opportunities.”

“I’d be glad to help.”

“But he must have a tour first before business, surely?” Lady Eleanor said with vigor, leaning forward. Nathaniel half-wondered if she was trying to delay such a business meeting, then judged himself to be overly worried for no reason and nodded.

“Very well. A tour would be good, thank you.” With a little luck, she would show him the family library. That way, he could do some research into inheritance law to discover all he could about the legalities of his brother’s will, and if he’d ever have a chance of contesting the legacy.

After breakfast, the tour began, and as Lady Eleanor showed him around the house, he began to notice odd things. Firstly, as they did not have many staff, no lady stood at a distance from them as a chaperone. Instead, all doors were left open to ensure they were never left alone.

What was more, the rooms were quite sparse and empty, though not completely. It was more the fact that Nathaniel could see the marks of where some paintings had once been on the walls, or where a pianoforte may have once stood in the corner of a room but no longer did.

“This is the music room,” Lady Eleanor declared as they walked through the room.

It was quite grand, with tall windows flanked in pristine white curtains. In the middle of the floor was a Persian rug and a harp that, judging by the text engraved on the golden edge, had been made in the Germanic countries. Nathaniel was admiring the rather eclectic mix of items, and the fact they came from across the world, when his eyes rested on the empty nook in the corner of the room.

“It is a music room?” he commented, then nodded at the one harp. “There is only one instrument.”

“Yes, there is.” She was unashamed in the acknowledgment. “We used to have a pianoforte, as you can probably deduce.” She gestured to the nook.

“Yet the harp stays.” He rounded the harp. “Do you play, Lady Eleanor?”

He already knew she did. Mr. Briarhurst wouldn’t stop bragging of her skills the night before.

“I do a little.” She stepped forward to the other side of the harp and ran her fingers across the strings. They hummed quietly in the air. “But quite ill, indeed. My skills are nothing compared to what my mother’s were.”

“Your mother? She was a skilled player?”

“Highly. It is why we keep the harp.” Lady Eleanor turned away as if she did not wish to speak of the subject anymore.

As she stepped back, Nathaniel’s eyes flitted from her to a portrait on the

wall. There was a woman recreated on the canvas so like Lady Eleanor that he stepped forward in surprise, rounding the harp and moving toward it. The eyes were green rather than blue, but it was the same full lips, the same contours in the cheeks.

“That’s her,” Lady Eleanor said, her voice soft across the room. “We should move on.” She opened the door on the other side of the room and moved out.

Clearly, she does not wish to talk of her mother.

Nathaniel followed Lady Eleanor, his curiosity growing by the moment. They moved from the music room to the grand dining room and to the ballroom. This was perhaps the emptiest of the lot, with a fair few blank spaces on the walls where paintings had once hung.

“Your father is in need of wise business advice, is he not?” he asked, though the tone wasn’t really that of a question.

“*Wise* advice being the key word,” Lady Eleanor said tightly, her pace increasing as they walked through the ballroom together. “I do not want him hurt by poor advice, or lured into a false sense of security. My father has had enough disappointments in his life. He does not need any more.” She looked at him rather seriously with these words.

What does that look mean?

“And how about you, Your Grace?” she asked, halting abruptly.

“What do you mean?” He turned to look at her, feeling strangely alone with her in this room, despite the open doors.

“Are you a man of wise business practice?” she asked, her brows lifting high. “Or is there something more to you?” The needling question intrigued him.

“I have a feeling there is more to you than the proper manner you presented last night and a knack for playing the harp,” Nathaniel said, walking around her as he took interest in the one painting in the room. “Mr. Briarhurst was most particular in singing your praises to anyone that would hear it.”

“I was endeavoring to talk about you, not me.”

“I noticed.”

“You are still avoiding the question.”

“Then you are as perceptive as I am.” Nathaniel’s rather teasing tone clearly didn’t please her. He glanced back at her, noting the way she moved her hands to her hips a little indignantly, before he focused on the painting before him. “An unusual painting. I have not seen the kind in many rooms in England.”

He was observing the canvas with great interest. Where many ballrooms held paintings of vast pastoral English landscapes, this one was highly different. It was of a sandy desert somewhere, with houses made out of yellow stone on one side and a man walking down a track road with a camel beside him. The piece was alive with golden and yellow light. Nathaniel could practically feel the heat jumping out of the paint.

“It is a favorite of mine and my father’s.” Lady Eleanor’s voice softened as she moved to stand beside him. “We have something of a fascination for other cultures, other parts of the world.”

Nathaniel angled his head to the side to see Lady Eleanor looked rather longingly at the painting.

“It is a very beautiful picture,” she observed in a quiet voice. “You, on your travels, must have seen the real thing, though. Did you spend all your time in America?”

“Mostly.” He walked on, trying not to go into details.

“You seem reluctant to talk of your travels.” Her shoes tapped quickly across the tiled floor as she hastened to keep up with him.

“I am.” He was not afraid to acknowledge this. Enough people knew his business as it was, and he hardly needed Lady Eleanor, a woman who could tell all to Mr. Briarhurst, to learn all of his business affairs. “Let us just say that yes, I have been to the Americas, and I have had a little success in trade there. That is all.”

He moved to the open doors that looked out over the garden, admiring the sight before him. The woodland was russet red, with the occasional golden leaf. Many of the leaves had fallen now they were in late November. It wouldn't be long until winter was upon them and Christmas was firmly in their midst.

“You say very little,” Lady Eleanor observed at his side.

“About as much as you do.” He looked at her, raising his eyebrow. She looked away again and chewed her lip, prompting him to laugh. The sound must have startled her, for she jerked her chin back toward him. “We both have our secrets, Lady Eleanor. We do not need to pry into one another's affairs on this tour, do we?”

“How enigmatically put.”

“Enigmatic? I have never been accused of that before.”

“How about icy? Reserved?”

“Oh, sharp tongue indeed.” Yet he was humored by it. He smiled as he stepped through the open doors onto the terrace in the garden and felt the chilly wind at once. It whipped around him, enshrouding him and making his breath cloud in the air. Lady Eleanor followed, running her hands over her bare arms, for she wore a gown with sleeves reaching only to her elbows. “So, what can you tell me about the garden?”

“It was originally designed by Capability Brown,” she said, seemingly unaware of the impressed look Nathaniel now gave her. “The parkland in particular is quite special here.” Her face softened into another of those brief but genuine smiles he had been treated to that morning.

“There are lots of nooks and special places within. There’s a grotto, a summer house that is more like a witch’s cottage, and a lake with a path underneath. It’s quite a marvel of ingenuity. One can feel like you’re no longer in London at all when you explore it.”

“I’d say you rather like that, Lady Eleanor.” His words made that smile fall

and she looked at him with her brows furrowing. “Is it the sense of escape you enjoy, I wonder?” He nodded back through the doorway at the painting. “From that picture and the way you gazed at it in awe, I’d be tempted to argue that an escape of any kind draws you in.”

Lady Eleanor laughed and stepped away. It was the first time he had heard her laugh, and to his surprise, he found himself following her, rather eager to hear it again.

“You seem to be making quick judgments about me when we met less than twenty-four hours ago, Your Grace.”

“The lesson may be not to judge a book by its cover, yet I fear many do.”

“Ah, and you do me, then?” She turned back and faced him in challenge. Stunned by the movement, he had to jump back to avoid a collision, though the idea of colliding with Lady Eleanor put a thrill through him that he had to quickly clamp down upon.

“Far from it. I always endeavor to look beneath the cover,” he said, his voice deepening. “And though the cover may be propriety, and a manner that obediently stands beside Mr. Briarhurst’s, I think there is something more here.” He cocked his head to the side, watching her intently. “A want of escape, perhaps.”

“You do not know me, Your Grace. Do not pretend to.” Her voice was sharp as she swept past him.

“Does that mean the tour is over?” he called to her as she crossed the terrace. Halting by the stone wall, she put her back to it, flitting around to face him again. Anger flashed in her eyes, and he couldn’t help wondering if he had read her quite accurately, and perhaps it was that which angered her so much.

“Your Grace, I—”

“Ha! Be on your guard, you cur!” a high-pitched voice squealed. As a long stick was thrust high from behind the wall, Lady Eleanor spun around, a hand on her chest.

“Oh, God’s wounds! Bea, what are you doing?”

A young girl suddenly clambered up the other side of the stone wall and sat upon it. She held the stick in her hands, grasping it as one would rather hold a sword, and swung it back and forth.

“Playing swords,” the young girl declared in innocence. “You do not play it with me anymore, so it seems I must make you.” She proceeded to poke her elder sister with the ‘sword’ and her sister swiped it away. Despite Lady

Eleanor's tired look, a small smile shone through.

"Oh, who is this?" The girl dropped down off the wall and hurried forward, practically running to Nathaniel. "You must be the duke the staff are all talking about."

"Must I? Well, I am." Nathaniel bowed to her. "Though something tells me I should not bow too deeply if I am about to be impaled with a sword." He playfully pointed at the stick and she held it high in triumph.

Lady Bea was remarkably like her elder sister in appearance, with the same blue eyes and honey-hued hair, though she had an eagerness in her manner that the elder sister missed. She dropped a deep curtsy, struggling to hold her skirt out as she held the stick wide, too.

"I'm Bea."

"*Lady* Beatrice," Lady Eleanor corrected her as she moved to her sister's side. "The Duke of Windhaven here is a gentleman of the *ton* and therefore must address you by your title."

"Ergh, *Lady* Bea, then." She sighed exasperatedly. "How can I pretend to be a pirate if I have to go around introducing myself as a *lady*? Most pirates are men anyway."

“Just wear a hat to disguise the curls.” Nathaniel nodded to her head.

“Oh. I like that idea.”

“Are you encouraging her?” Lady Eleanor challenged him, though her smile still glimmered through.

“Yes.” He didn’t deny it, and Lady Eleanor bit her lip as if holding back laughter.

“Besides, you do not need to dress as a man to be a pirate,” Nathaniel said with ease, walking around Bea as if he were examining her. “Have you not heard of Anne Bonny and Mary Read?”

“Who are they?” Bea asked excitedly, lowering her stick and resting it on the ground so it was now more like a cane.

“They were pirates in the Caribbean and Jamaica. Nearly a hundred years ago now.”

“Really?” Bea looked so excited her eyes almost bulged out of her face.

“Do not get any ideas now.” Lady Eleanor took her sister’s shoulder and offered Nathaniel a reproving look. “Just because you like a life of adventure, Your Grace, it does not mean we have to encourage my sister to run off and join a pirate ship tomorrow.”

“And the idea has never tempted you, my lady?” Nathaniel asked, wondering what more Lady Eleanor was keeping hidden beneath that quiet exterior of hers.

“Who do you think taught me to play with swords?” Bea asked and held up the stick again. “Eleanor!”

“Ah, Bea.” Lady Eleanor held a hand over her face as if to hide from the world.

“Now we are learning the true you, are we not?” he whispered as he walked past her. When he came that near, Nathaniel jerked back at how inviting a scent Lady Eleanor wore. It smelled strongly of rose and honey, and it made him want to rather step closer to her. “Well, Lady Bea, if we are to see you someday set sail on the high seas, we should test your sword skills, should we not?”

Nathaniel hurried down a set of steps in the stone terrace and toward the lawn, where he found another large stick. He snatched it up and brandished it around just as Lady Bea caught up with him.

“A fight to the death?” he said playfully.

“I’ll win,” Lady Bea declared confidently. “I always do.” She launched herself at him, and Nathaniel avoided her easily. He considerably dropped his usual skill with a sword and let her win by poking him with the stick more than once.

The whole time, Nathaniel felt the gaze of Lady Eleanor, who stayed on the stone terrace. He could not decide if he rather liked being watched by her, or if it irked him in every way.

Chapter 5

“Take this.” Nathaniel held the ledger open, proffering the charts and maps within so the Earl of Wessex could see everything in detail. “This will show you everything there is to know about the land and what business ventures are worth investing in.”

“This is extensive indeed.” Lord Wessex rolled up his sleeves and bent down over the maps, taking it all in.

A creak made Nathaniel look around at the library door, feeling strangely watched. He couldn't help feeling more and more certain that Lady Eleanor had tried to prevent or delay this business meeting as much as possible.

After he had finished his sword game with Lady Bea and they'd all shared a luncheon, he'd offered to show some things to Lord Wessex. Lady Eleanor had immediately tried to intervene, but with little success for her sister wanted her attention.

Nathaniel looked at the door, wondering if he was imagining the shadow he thought he could glimpse through the gap.

Is she watching us?

One thing he knew for certain after her tour this morning was that Lady Eleanor mistrusted him. She was most particular in informing him that her father had been through hard times, her protectiveness gleaming through, and she had only softened when Bea had appeared.

At least after his sword fight with Lady Bea, he had had the fortune to see one of those true smiles on Lady Eleanor's cheeks again. She had stared at him in alarm, as if she could not believe the proof before her eyes.

“What is all this?” Lord Wessex asked, unfurling a map of the southern states. “Why have you put little crosses here?”

“Ah, that is because these are areas where I am avoiding investments.” Nathaniel drew up his chair beside the earl's own, endeavoring to show him more. In fear that either Lady Eleanor or Lady Bea could be at the door, he lowered his voice, not wanting them to hear what he had to say next.

“To my dismay, these areas frequently use slaves on plantations and various farmland. Believe me, my lord, having seen some of what I have seen, you would not want to invest in them either.” He shook his head, locking his hands together.

His time in there had been thrilling, and he had loved the adventure, but he couldn't deny that seeing the world meant seeing it both in shadow as well as in the light. The use of slavery disgusted him. Though it was banned in England, America didn't yet have such a law.

"Good God." Lord Wessex went rigid in his chair. "I did not realize. Yes, yes, I'll be certain to avoid these areas." He hurried to make a list of the names Nathaniel pointed out to him.

"I recommend looking at these areas instead." He turned over another map and offered up a second list. "I've invested in these ventures, which have so far proved profitable. I can introduce you to some associates I have on the docks in Southampton. They will be able to put you in touch with some of their own contacts in New York and beyond."

"Thank you, Your Grace. Thank you indeed for this." Lord Wessex was alive with excitement and energy, scribbling notes as hurriedly as he could, his quill moving so fast he must have tickled himself on the nose with the feathered end more than just a few times.

"I am glad I can help," Nathaniel assured him with a smile as he sat back and waited for the earl to finish his notes. Once more, he angled his head around, tilting his chair far enough back so he could look at the door. He was certain now there were shadows there. Perhaps even both of the sisters were trying to listen in?

Why is Lady Eleanor so suspicious of me?

“I am grateful to you, Your Grace.” Lord Wessex said as he started copying out the map, too. “This sort of information, it is not easy to come by.”

“It is I who is grateful.” Nathaniel had been faced with quite a dilemma the night before. In his race to come to London from Sussex, he had not made arrangements for any lodgings, so finding Mr. Briarhurst was ruling out him staying at any other of the family homes, Nathaniel had felt lost and uncertain of where to go.

The night hour had been so late that finding any inn or club to take him in at that time may have proved difficult. “You were kind enough to offer me somewhere to stay when I was quite at a loss with what to do with myself. I am indebted to you.”

Lord Wessex looked up from his notes with a smile. “Worry not about that. I was glad I could help. Furthermore, I felt I knew something of you when I looked at you.” He pointed at Nathaniel’s face with the quill, making him frown.

“Have we met before?”

“No, no, far from it.” Lord Wessex chuckled. “Though I of course knew of

your parents when they were alive, and your brother too. No, what I mean to say is that when I looked at you last night, I recognized something of myself in you.” His smile grew rather sad. “I fear I wore that expression you had last night quite a lot after I lost my wife. Grief... it can strike us all in our least expected moments.”

Nathaniel blinked, amazed that Lord Wessex had seen this in him.

“I have not had long to grieve my brother,” he confessed in a whisper. “It has been one lot of bad news after another, and there was a moment last night when I looked at Mr. Briarhurst and realized what I had lost.” He stopped himself from going on and scratched the stubble along his chin.

One of the ledgers he was keeping firmly stuffed in his bag beside them, reluctant to show it to anyone, was full of letters from David. These last two years, he and David had written to one another more and more. The old coldness that had been between them when Nathaniel first left had faded away, and there had been warmth between them once again. They talked as they had done as children, openly and with true friendship.

“I longed to see him again when I was in the Americas. I am only sorry I never got the chance.”

“Such regrets can stay with us,” Lord Wessex said with a sympathetic smile. “I am sorry for your pain, more than you know. If I can give one piece of advice in my old and weary state, it is this, Your Grace: Do not live your life

holding onto regrets. Look to the future instead.”

He angled his head and looked at a clock over the mantelpiece, plainly watching the hands move as the second hand ticked loudly in the air. “Before you know it, time runs out, and you realize what little you have done with it.”

“Yes, I am sure you are right.” Determined to make the earl smile again, Nathaniel pointed to one of the maps. “Here is the best advice I can give when it comes to investments in America, my lord. There is a rise in cotton. I recommend you move fast.”

“What are they doing?” Bea asked at Eleanor’s side.

“Shh, Bea. What we are doing is hardly appropriate. Do you wish to get caught?” Eleanor hadn’t listened at a door in many years. When she was younger, she did it to hear how far gone her father was with his brandy, but now she did it to find out what the Duke of Windhaven was discussing with her father.

“No. I’d like another sword game, though.” Bea turned away and pretend to thrust another sword through the air. “He was rather good, was he not? But I still beat him.” She triumphantly struck a fist into the air, then pretended to

be the winded party, tottering on her toes and clutching at her stomach with an overly dramatic flair.

Eleanor smiled at her side before peering around the door again.

He was good with her.

This thought startled Eleanor as much as anything else. She had watched in awe as the Duke of Windhaven had not only gone out of his way to play with her sister but to even adopt what was evidently good swordsmanship to a poorer quality, allowing Bea to win.

It was a kind thing to do.

Eleanor wrung her hands together as she watched the duke sitting with her father now, comparing what he had done with the brief times that Mr. Briarhurst had met Bea. Mr. Briarhurst avoided her as much as he possibly could.

When he had once seen Bea in Covent Garden, when Eleanor had taken her shopping for a new gown, he had acknowledged her presence with a bow, then not spoken to her at all. It was as if she was a fly on the wall rather than a girl. Bea had hung her head, growing increasingly miserable that day.

“What are they talking about now?” Bea hissed.

“Shh,” Eleanor pleaded, trying to listen in to the conversation.

All she could really make out was that the Duke of Windhaven was showing her father a map of the Americas and advising what industries to pay attention to and which to ignore. She chewed her lip, frantic with worry and fearful of the moment the duke would offer up an opportunity for her father to invest in one of his ventures.

Surely that was what any trickster would do? It would mark the end for the whole family if her father lost another bean!

She waited for her moment, determined to interrupt with some wild excuse if the duke mentioned anything of the kind.

“He is very handsome, is he not?” Bea whispered, pulling on the back of Eleanor’s skirt. Eleanor shifted to the side, allowing her sister to have a better look.

“Hmm,” she murmured, reluctant to give her true feelings on the matter. It was something she had acknowledged since she had first been introduced to

the duke the night before, but no good came from admitting it aloud.

“Much handsomer than that man you’re trying to marry.”

“Bea!” Eleanor whispered in indignation. “Marriage is not about a man’s handsomeness or a woman’s beauty. It’s about kindness of heart, respect, affection, all those other good things. You should look for the company of a man you can stand, not one who has a fair face.”

“Perhaps not.” She screwed up her nose and raised her head to look at Eleanor with an amused smile. “Though I imagine it makes it easier to enjoy a man’s company if he has a nice face to look at, too.”

“You are getting more mischievous.”

“Me? I learned from the best.” Bea laughed under her breath. “Who was it who used to sneak out of the house in the middle of the night to explore the grounds? Or go hiding in the stable because you were trying to have an early morning ride before breakfast without Father knowing?”

“Do as I say, not as I do. Have you not heard that phrase before? I’m sure I’ve said it.”

“Then answer me this.” Bea turned and folded her arms. “If we have to be ladies of propriety,” she looked both outraged and disgusted at the very idea, “why are we listening in to a conversation that we plainly shouldn’t be listening to?”

“It is out of necessity, not choice, believe me. In fact, just trust me on this, Bea. I have a reason not to trust the Duke of Windhaven, so I’m keeping an eye on him.”

“I like him.” Bea was firm in her resolve as she turned back to watch him. “And by the way you were staring at him earlier, you don’t *dislike* him.”

“What do you mean? I was not staring at him.” Before Eleanor could put up any further defense, scraps of the conversation inside the study drifted toward her.

“What business ventures do you have yourself, then?” her father asked with keenness. “These cotton opportunities you mentioned...”

“Well, there is one in particular we could discuss—”

No, they shall not!

Eleanor burst in through the door, startling Bea so much that she scampered to the side, ending up almost flattened to the doorframe.

“Ah, Eleanor.” Her father looked up with a smile. “What a good meeting this is turning out to be. His Grace has been very kind in all that he is willing to share.”

Eleanor was breathing heavily as she stared at the duke, noting the way that he held a finger to his lips and leaned his chin into the palm of his hands. There was great amusement in those dark eyes as he seemed to be holding himself back from laughing.

“That was an abrupt entrance,” he managed to say, his smile glimmering through.

“Was it?” She pretended ignorance. “Forgive me, I must claim my father for my own company. Father, we need to talk about Bea’s schooling.”

“Now, dear?”

“Yes. Now.” Before any more could be said, Eleanor grasped her father’s arm and marched him out of the room.

“Is everything well, Eleanor?”

“Perfectly,” she lied through gritted teeth, now realizing she would have to think of something to discuss with her father about Bea’s education.

Nathaniel lost his battle not to laugh after Lady Eleanor and the earl left. He chuckled as he sat back in the chair and Lady Bea skipped into the room. She chose to the chair her father had just vacated, sitting so far into it that her feet lifted off the floor and she swung them back and forth.

“Was that subtle or not?” Lady Bea asked with a great smile.

“Not remotely, but I greatly enjoyed it. Shall I share a secret with you, Lady Bea?” He leaned toward her, and she leaned toward him, too. “I suspect your sister doesn’t like me very much.”

Bea sniggered. “Then why does she look at you so much?”

“She does, eh?” Nathaniel’s eyes shot to the door, somewhat intrigued by this notion. He found Lady Eleanor increasingly distracting today, her beauty and her secrets making him stare. If he was not the only one staring, then at least it was something. “They have gone to discuss your education then? I would have thought she’d discuss that with your governess.”

“I have no governess.” Bea leaned forward and looked at the maps on the table.

“No governess?” Nathaniel said in surprise, then felt the guilt sway within him. What had become painfully obvious, both from his tour of the house and his conversations with the earl, was that the family was hardly flush with money. They had fallen on hard times and bad debts. He supposed a governess was a cost that could be easily done away with. “Yet you knew where the Caribbean was when I mentioned it early, did you not?”

Bea pointed triumphantly down at a spot on the map.

“There. Eleanor has been very good at teaching me my maps and charts.” She smiled and drew some of the other maps toward her. “I can name many countries. We used to talk about what we thought we’d find in these countries if we ever got the chance to travel the world.”

Nathaniel didn’t know which surprised him more, the idea that Lady Eleanor was the one conducting her sister’s education or that Lady Eleanor wished to

travel the world.

I knew there was more to her.

“She takes on the part of your governess, then?” Nathaniel asked with interest, drawing another map in front of Bea.

Her eyes widened when she saw the creatures that had been drawn on page. It was a copy Nathaniel had taken from a book once, showing the various animals that could be found in different parts of the world.

“She does.” Bea’s smile grew wider as she traced the animals across the map with her small fingers. “This summer, she showed me how to plant flowers and vegetables in the garden. We’re growing turnips this year so we can eat them in the winter.”

Nathaniel grew increasingly intrigued. It seemed Lady Eleanor was a far more practical and well-educated young woman than Mr. Briarhurst had let on. He’d seemed much keener on talking about her beauty and the fact she was an accomplished harpist than anything else.

“Here, let me show you something.” Nathaniel reached into his bag and pulled out a book, being careful to avoid the ledger where he had stuffed all of his brother’s letters. He pulled out another thick compendium and placed it

on the desk in front of Bea. “Consider this a gift for you and your sister.”

“What is it?”

“An encyclopedia. It is a sort of dictionary of many things to be found in the world. Here, you can find all the details on these countries that fascinate you so much.” He turned the page, watching her gasp in awe at the illustrations on the inner pages.

“We cannot accept.”

Another voice disturbed the pair of them. Nathaniel’s chin jerked up to see Lady Eleanor had returned. She was hurrying across the room, her hands wringing together.

“It is a kind gift, to be certain, but we could not take something like that from you.”

“You are not taking it. I am gifting it. It is part of my way of thanking your family for having me to stay.”

“Is it not beautiful, Eleanor?” Bea cooed in delight as she turned the pages.

Lady Eleanor said nothing, just stared at Nathaniel. For some reason, he found it even harder this time to drag his eyes away from her.

Chapter 6

“There must be something here. There has to be something.” Nathaniel walked up and down between the shelves of the library, casting a gaze around. He carried a tallow candle in one hand, raising the brass holder high so he could better see the lettering written across the spines. He’d been at the Earl of Wessex’s house for three days now, and the last couple had passed rather quickly.

The day before, Nathaniel had observed from a window how much Lady Eleanor was taking her sister’s education in hand, walking with her in the garden and teaching her about the plants. Nathaniel had stayed inside, offering more advice to the earl about his business affairs.

Now alone, Nathaniel was taking advantage of the family’s large family, rather comforted to see that this seemed to be the one room in the house the earl was most reluctant to sell anything from. Trawling through the books, he searched for something that could help him better understand inheritance law and see if he could ever challenge Mr. Briarhurst enough to reclaim something small.

Anything would do. Some small token to remember David by, and that would be enough.

He took down two large volumes off the shelf and crossed the room, placing them on a writing bureau close to the fire. Sitting with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and his fingers covered in ink stains, he took notes from the pages.

Despite his efforts, his research didn't seem to help. Titles were enshrined in law, meaning they had to be passed to the next male heir, but when it came to anything else, like land, tenants, and belongings, it was another matter entirely.

Nothing? Will I never see any of it again?

With frustration, Nathaniel looked at the clock over the mantelpiece. That ticking had seemed much louder to him ever since he'd caught the Earl of Wessex looking rather despairingly at the clock face. Turning his back to the clock, he reached into the heavy leather satchel at his feet and took out a large ledger. When he opened it, some of David's letters fell before him.

Seeing David's handwriting again made him feel as if thunder rumbled deep within his gut. It shook him to his core, the grief that was unwavering. He picked up the first letter and laid his hand to the lettering, gutted that he would never again be able to talk to the man who had written those letters.

Nathaniel blinked hard, pushing away any temptation to cry. He turned to one of the last letters David had sent him and read the words again, for it was of his favorites.

Dear Nathaniel,

When are you coming home again? I know well enough why you might not think of it as your home. I remember sitting on the staircase, dumbstruck and speechless, as our father ordered you out of the house, pointing at the door and telling you that you'd never be welcome here again. After that, how could you still look at it as your home?

Yet I wish you would. Many nights alone in this house have recently taught me something—we only know what we had after we have lost it, and I regret losing you, brother.

Our letters this last year have let me see what has truly always been in your heart. I cannot deny that my own work to take care of the tenants on this land has revealed much of what you warned years ago. I know now why you told our father that he was taking advantage of the people, running them into the ground.

Maybe I was willfully blind, not wishing to believe it, but you were right. Why did he send you out of the house for pointing it out? We are responsible for these people! This last winter, the people have suffered much.

There were poor harvests, and with the bitter winter, many fell ill. I paid the doctors from my own pocket to come and take care of our tenants, but I was

too late and it was not enough. I should have insulated the cottages, put in reserves of food. Anything! Instead, I let our father take from these people what they were owed and line our own pockets with it.

I seek to mend the ways of the past, and I long for you to come and see the work I am doing. I don't doubt that from what you have seen in America, you could advise me more on what to do.

From what you have written of the abolitionist motion in America, it pained me greatly, and I have this week sent funds to an associate of mine in the States who is also working to protect these poor people. You have an experience of the world that I envy, Nathaniel. I need that now. I need you here.

There is something more I must tell you when you return, but this will be saved for seeing you in person. It cannot be told by letter—I want to say it when you and I can look one another in the eye and embrace as brothers again.

Write back soon, when you can.

Your loving brother,

David.

The tears pricked his eyes again. Nathaniel released a shuddering breath as he read the words and noticed something interesting about the date on the letter. It was written just a matter of weeks before David died.

“Did he know?” he whispered aloud. Was this the news that his brother wished to tell him, eye to eye, that he was dangerously ill? On receiving this letter, Nathaniel had made arrangements to leave the country, and he had written back to David saying he would manage to do so within a few months.

The next letter he received from his brother was jovial. He told Nathaniel all of his news, then at the end he wished Nathaniel “Godspeed,” wishing he would come home sooner.

The next letter Nathaniel received had informed him of David’s death.

He let the letter drop to the book and sat back, making the chair creak beneath him.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

The soft voice disturbed Nathaniel, and he turned his head to see another had

entered the library. Lady Eleanor had been crossing toward a shelf when she spied him.

“Forgive my intrusion. I came to find a book.”

“Please, continue. Ignore me.” Nathaniel waved a hand for her to carry on. “It is your home. I am the guest within it.”

“All the same, I did not mean to disturb you.” She moved toward a shelf and took a book, avoiding his gaze. He rather wondered why she bothered. Like him, she must have noticed that they stared at one another often these last few days.

“What is it you are reading? If I believe the tales of your sister, she says you are a great reader indeed. Though even I think Lady Bea may be prone to exaggeration when she says you have read most of the books in this library.”

“That would be impossible for anyone.” Lady Eleanor gestured at the sheer number of books that lined the wooden shelves, from floor to ceiling. Some walls stretched so high that library steps were pressed alongside, aiding any reader to reach the books at the very top of the stack. “Though yes, I am a great reader.”

She held the book in front of her, and Nathaniel’s eyes darted to it. He

recognized the cover at once, for he had picked up the book earlier in the day himself.

“*Robinson Crusoe.*”

“Yes.” She looked surprised, taking a step toward him. “You have read it?”

“Many times. *Thus fear of danger is ten thousand times more terrifying than danger itself.*” He smiled with the quote and nodded at her book. “One of my favorites. Though I always felt I should have read it when I was younger, to have had the full impact at the right age.”

“As Defoe said, *it is never too late to be wise.*” When she quoted the book back at him, he couldn’t help chuckling in alarm. “Ah, I have startled you.”

“What gave it away? The laughter or the expression?”

“The widening of the eyes, or the slackening of the jaw so far it might have hit the floor,” she jested. He smiled more, quite stunned at the transformation before him. For a change, Lady Eleanor wasn’t looking at him with pure suspicion, but something more akin to amusement.

“You are well read. Have you read other of Defoe’s works?”

“All of them that I can find.” She sat down in an armchair a short distance away, with a heavy sigh. “Though I have never been able to get my hands on a copy of *Moll Flanders*.”

“I’d recommend it, though have a handkerchief nearby for it. It’s a hard read indeed.” Nathaniel shuffled away his brother’s letters, rather praying that Lady Eleanor hadn’t seen the tears in his own eyes as he had been thinking of his brother.

“I’d love to read it. Though for now, I think I must settle myself with the likes of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Treasure Island*.”

“They’re all novels about adventure, my lady.” Nathaniel looked up at her thoughtfully. “Was I right on that first day about you wanting an escape?”

She didn’t answer but closed the book and stood, turning to walk away.

“Ah, I have scared you away again. It is your home, remember? Do not let me chase you from your own library.”

“I was merely illustrating my wish for an escape.” She looked back at him with a playful glint in her eye and he smiled once more. When Lady Eleanor seemed to forget to be suspicious of him, she could be rather enchanting—nothing like the prim and ornamental woman he had seen on Mr. Briarhurst’s arm that first night.

“You surprise me in many ways,” he confessed, the words tumbling from his lips.

“I do. How?” She walked past more of the shelves, coming back toward him. As she stepped into the candlelight, the honey streaks of her light-brown hair were even more noticeable than before. His eyes tarried on them for longer than they should have done.

“Such an educated woman as you, I would have thought you’d be married already.”

And to a man far superior to Mr. Briarhurst. Though he kept this latter thought to himself.

“Most men do not want a well-read wife, as I have been reliably informed.” She began to fidget with the book in her hands.

“Who on earth told me that?”

“I have seen it, for one thing.” She stepped toward him, lowering her voice a little. “I have had two Seasons thus far, Your Grace. I have danced with enough men to notice they grow bored and their eyes glaze over if I start talking about reading.”

“Then you are dancing with the wrong men.” He stood from his seat and stuffed the ledger with his brother’s letters back in his pack. “Men of good sense do not want silly wives who think of nothing but dancing and fine dresses, believe me.”

“Oh? And you consider yourself a man of good sense?” Her teasing made them both smile at one another.

“Perhaps of a little sense, though hardly the greatest sense in the world. Believe me,” he leaned a little toward her, rather entranced when he noticed that she didn’t lean back, “I have my faults as much as the next man.”

“What faults are they?” she asked as he walked around her, replacing some of the volumes he had been reading back on the shelves. “Come now, I have shared a secret with you. Surely you can share one with me too?”

“Very well.” He replaced the last book and turned to look at her. “I give my opinion far too freely, and when it is not asked for. That is one of my greatest

faults. You must have noticed that yourself, have you not?”

“Hmm.” She wrinkled her nose.

“Ha! I think your politeness is making you refrain from answering.” He walked around her and gestured to the encyclopedia he had gifted to Lady Bea. It was opened to a page where she had left it on another desk, though Lady Eleanor had insisted again that afternoon they could not accept it. “And please, hold back your politeness for now and accept this gift. It makes your sister happy.”

“But a book like this...” Lady Eleanor moved to his side, standing before the book and running her fingers over the illustrations. “This is no cheap thing. You have been here a few days. You have seen from my father’s conversation and the state of this house that we could not afford such a thing ourselves, not at this time.”

“Then consider it an early Christmas gift. Even your politeness could not reject that, could it?”

“It’s November. We have a few weeks left until Christmas.”

“Shall I emphasize the word *early*?” he whispered, leaning toward her and raising an eyebrow. She laughed softly and Nathaniel was quite encapsulated

by the sound. When Lady Eleanor was on her own, she could be entirely different.

If only she let down her walls in this manner all the time. If only she wasn't courting Mr. Briarhurst.

A sudden mad idea entered Nathaniel's head. If things were different, had he and Lady Eleanor met another way and she wasn't courting another, would he have considered asking her for a courtship himself? The only ladies that had ever turned his head in the past were somewhat wild in character.

They did not bother with propriety or any grandness, but Lady Eleanor was something else. She was a true lady, yet there were hints of a more adventurous spirit. Was she not clutching *Robinson Crusoe* to her chest now as if it was her own beating heart?

"Keep it," he urged again. "Please."

"As you wish." She tapped the book at her chest. "Thank you. Bea loves it."

"It is for both of you."

At his words, she looked up sharply. Her lips parted as if she wished to say something more, but the pair of them were disturbed.

“Ah, Your Grace, there you are.” The Earl of Wessex bustled into the room and Lady Eleanor scurried back, increasing the distance between Nathaniel and her, as if they had not been standing so close, side by side. “I wanted to ask you a quick question about this letter I have just received. It is supposedly some advice about investments in Africa, but I do not understand the enigmatic writing.”

“Let me see.” Nathaniel took the letter rather eagerly. He’d seen such letters as this before. They were cleverly worded by those who were trying to get people to invest in the slave trade without them knowing truly what they were plunging money into. “They’re trying to hide the fact it’s slavery, my lord.”

“Slavery?” Lord Wessex was horrified. Lady Eleanor turned around so sharply that she dropped her book and it landed on her toe. The short hopping motion that followed made Nathaniel smile. There was something intriguing about seeing Lady Eleanor drop the perfect act of propriety for a few seconds. “Goodness. Why do they not just say that?”

“To get more investors without people knowing the cruelty of what they’re doing. I suggest you write back at once and tell them where to stick this offer,” Nathaniel urged.

“Gladly. Only too gladly. God’s blood, I had no idea just how rife this

problem still was. Thank you, Your Grace. You can see things in these letters that I cannot.” Lord Wessex went out of the room again, re-reading his letter and muttering to himself about the underhandedness of some businessmen.

Nathaniel turned to pick up Lady Eleanor’s book for him just as her hand closed on it, too. Their fingers touched and she jerked back fast, allowing him to take the book and pass it to her.

“Thank you,” she murmured, blushing a crimson shade. “May I ask you something?”

Their hands inadvertently brushed on the book as he passed it to her. He rather hoped he kept a calm countenance and she didn’t notice the effect it had on him.

She’s more dangerous to me than I realized...

“Of course,” he encouraged her on.

“Why are you helping my father?”

“I’m sorry?”

“With what you just did. Many a man wouldn’t have been interested enough to read the letter, let alone warn him of such things hidden within. A lot of men keep to their own business.” She chewed her lip, staring him in the eye. “Yet you have been advising my father the last few days, and when I pressed him to ask if you had requested him to purchase in a venture of your own...”

“Wait. Lady Eleanor,” he paused, tilting his head to the side, “do you mean to say you suspected me of trying to persuade your father to hand his money over to *me*?”

She didn’t answer but kept her chin high, apparently struggling for the right words.

“Ah, now I understand.” He nodded. “I might pride myself on my perceptiveness, and though I have judged something of your character, I have clearly not discovered enough. Rest assured, I am not here to take any of your family’s money. I am in England for quite another reason entirely.”

He turned away, hurrying back to the writing bureau and sitting down.

“Then why help him?” She followed him, planting her book on the bureau so that his attention snapped toward her. “Why help him at all?”

“Your father is one of the few people to show me kindness since I have returned. As much as exploration is a good thing, it has taught me a harsh truth. Kindness, the true sort, is not an easy thing to find. I believe it should always be returned. It’s rarer than gold.”

She smiled then, so fully that he felt as if he was seeing her for the first time.

Continue to smile like that around me, Lady Eleanor, and I think you and I will get along very well, indeed.

Chapter 7

“Can I come? Oh, please, please, can I?” Bea jumped up and down on the bottom step of the staircase Eleanor descended.

“You know you are not old enough, Bea.” Eleanor adjusted the long sleeves of her white gloves. “Besides, a ball is not half so exciting as you seem to think it is.”

“Here, here,” a voice said in agreement from the shadows of the ballroom. Eleanor searched for the voice she now knew so well.

Darkness had already fallen as they were in the depths of November and the nights were pulling in early. It meant Eleanor had not seen the Duke of Windhaven at first as he moved in the shadows of the hallway and then stepped forward into the candlelight. He jerked twice to look at her, as if realizing he had not looked properly at the first time.

“Is there something wrong?” Eleanor asked, adjusting the sleeves of her gown and her gloves once more.

“No, no,” he said hurriedly. “Nothing wrong indeed. I was just admiring

your... gown.”

Bea jumped up and down on the bottom step again, looking increasingly delighted. Eleanor willed her face not to flush even more than it already was doing. When the duke looked at her in such a way, she could almost fool herself that he didn't just look at her as the daughter of the man who had given him a house for a month, but as something more.

“Please, can I come?” Bea asked again.

“You heard the duke.” Eleanor walked around her sister and drew level with the duke in the hallway. “They are not nearly such exciting events as you think.”

She halted by the mirror, checking her appearance. The dark green gown was well structured, and she hoped flattered the slimness of her figure. Her light brown hair was swept up high, only two curls hanging down either side of her ears. The paste jewelry she wore, which she prayed no one would notice was false in the candlelight, glittered as it dangled from her ears.

“They are in fact, dull,” the duke pretended to whisper to Bea. “No one plays at swordfight unless things go very wrong indeed and a man must challenge another to a duel.”

“Really?” Bea said excitedly.

“It never happens.” The duke grimaced. “Instead, what you get is a lot of people standing around, drinking far too much wine.”

“Talking of rumors and scandals that they in fact know little about,” Eleanor added.

“Dancing, and talking of those that are dancing with one another, as if they are declarations of marriage,” the duke went on.

“And everyone competes to get noticed, with far too many ladies fluttering fans in certain places.” At Eleanor’s words, the duke laughed heartily, tipping his head back.

Her eyes flitted toward him in the reflection of the mirror.

Maybe he isn’t as icy as I first thought.

The fact she had first thought him cold or icy at all now seemed mad to her. The duke had the warmest laugh she had ever heard, and it delighted her whenever she was able to inspire it.

“You two sound as if you despair of it as much as each other,” Bea observed, folding her arms and looking rather indignant as she sat down on the stairs. “I’m sure it’s better than sitting in bed and waiting for the sun to come up.”

“Read that book I gave you,” Eleanor urged. “Then you will not be there in the darkness but far away in some mystical land, escaping to the wider world.” She adjusted the necklace at her throat and found herself wondering if the duke would like the emerald-like jewelry.

Shouldn’t I be wondering if Mr. Briarhurst will like it?

She chastised herself and turned her back on the mirror to find the duke was watching her from where he leaned on the banister at the bottom of the stairs.

“Someday, you should see it, my lady, rather than just dream of the wider world.”

His voice had deepened, and Eleanor tried to ignore the butterflies that seemed to quiver in her stomach at this tone.

“If only,” she murmured.

“I told you she longs for adventure,” Bea said in a whisper that was hardly quiet at all. “She just will not say it aloud.”

“Not all of us are so fortunate enough to be able to indulge in such things, Bea.” Eleanor tried to be practical. At her somewhat somber words, both the duke and Bea fell quiet. The silence was only disturbed when Bea made her repeated pleas again.

“Please, can I come?” Bea asked. Fortunately, this time, another voice answered her.

“No, you cannot,” Richard answered as he hurried down the stairs, adjusting his cuffs. As was his habit, he moved to Eleanor, who righted the cuffs for him. “I may already be facing losing one daughter from this house by Christmas. I have no wish to lose the other so soon.”

“By Christmas?” the duke muttered.

“Oh.” Bea sighed and rested her chin in the palms of her hands. “I hope Mr. Briarhurst doesn’t ask you to marry him by then.”

“I’ll miss you, too,” Eleanor whispered.

“It’s not that.” Bea wrinkled her nose. “I just don’t like him at all.”

The duke and Richard both laughed while Eleanor bit her lip, trying not to laugh herself. She could hardly blame Bea for such a feeling and rather wished she could join in with the sentiment, but she could not.

I have to force myself to like him. I will have to marry him, for my father’s and Bea’s sake.

Her eyes lingered on the duke before she snapped her gaze away again, wondering why she felt her chest ached a little as she looked at him and thought of Mr. Briarhurst.

Eleanor smiled uneasily at Sophie behind her, who was trying her best to distract her with good conversation as she stood beside Mr. Briarhurst and feigned interest in the conversation that he was having with the portly investment banker she had met before.

“How much distraction will you need tonight, do you think?” Sophie whispered in her ear.

“More than this.” Eleanor looked away as Mr. Briarhurst turned to her and she smiled wider. Sophie ensnared another lady nearby in conversation, as if that was where she had been for the last few minutes.

“Yes, yes, we shall discuss the affair in detail.” The investment banker offered a wink at Mr. Briarhurst. “Now you have all this land, it would be wise to do something with it.”

“Yes, yes, indeed.”

As the investment banker stepped away, Eleanor looked at Mr. Briarhurst behind her, wondering for the first time what the truth was behind the whole affair that had left the Duke of Windhaven disinherited from his family’s fortune, with every penny and shilling of it being bestowed on Mr. Briarhurst’s head.

“It was kind of you to extend the invitation for this evening to our guest,” Eleanor said to him, in the hope of steering the conversation toward the duke.

“Well, he is my late friend’s brother.” Mr. Briarhurst looked uneasy as he fidgeted with his claret glass. He glanced across the room, clearly hunting out

the duke. Eleanor followed the gaze and found her stomach tightening when she saw the duke surrounded by a group of ladies who were all most eager to talk to him. She couldn't help wishing she was amongst them, rather than where she was.

The duke had worn another one of his unorthodox suits, the gray material contrasting the darkness of the others in the room. It set off the tan to his skin beautifully, in a way that had Eleanor's eyes trailing across the flash of skin she could see at his neck, where he had loosened his cravat in the heat of the room.

"I owed him such an invitation, even if he did leave the Windhaven home under a cloud."

"There are many rumors as to why he left," Eleanor began slowly. "One doesn't know what to think. I suppose you know more than most."

"Ah, canny, Eleanor. Yet that was my friend's affair. I cannot divulge the details."

"No, of course not, and I would not expect you to. It's just that I believe you know more of the Duke of Windhaven's character than any other. You would know if he was a trustworthy man."

She spoke the latter words in a lighter tone, rather uncertain what to think. After being so certain of the Duke of Windhaven's endeavor to trick her father, she'd had to accept over the last few days that if it was his aim, he was going about it in a strange way.

He was good-humored, and offered sound advice in business. He hadn't once tried to persuade her father to invest in a venture of his own, and he had made that kind gift of the encyclopedia to Bea.

Eleanor wasn't sure what to make of the duke at all, and the fact that she was finding him increasingly handsome, even more so than before, was proving problematic. Even now, when she should have been looking at Mr. Briarhurst, she was looking at him across the room.

He had that cold and mysterious air to him again, reserved as he rather minimally joined in conversation with the ladies around him. He looked away as the ladies laughed about something, and his eyes found hers across the room.

"The betrayal broke David, that is what I do know," Mr. Briarhurst said with a heavy sigh.

"Betrayal?" Eleanor supposed Mr. Briarhurst was talking about the duke trying to steal his family's money. She tore her gaze from the duke's and looked at Mr. Briarhurst.

“Yes, indeed. Poor man.” He sighed heavily. “It seems to the very last dear David was determined for his brother to be repaid in kind for the betrayal. Still, they share blood, do they not? I could not refuse to invite him here.”

“Yes, I suppose.” She swallowed around a lump in her throat. “Did you not say you were left more than one estate by your friend? Could the Duke of Windhaven not have stayed at the other while the first is undergoing renovation?”

“Oh, well...” Mr. Briarhurst seemed abruptly very interested in his claret. “I am having changes made to that one, too.”

“I see.” It was the first she had heard of this. She looked away only to find that the Duke of Windhaven hadn’t looked away from her, even as a lady at his side waved the fan in front of her cleavage, trying to get his attention. As Eleanor bit her lip, trying not to laugh at the lady’s action, the duke must have seen her temptation for he looked back at this particular lady, then fought his own laughter, too.

He stood beside many of the Christmas decorations that had been arranged by their hosts. Evergreens and sugar-soaked delicacies draped the table beside him, with the occasional flickering candle flecked with gold leaf, their flames casting him in an orange light.

“You seem particularly interested in the duke this evening, Eleanor.”

“Do I?” She jerked her head back toward Mr. Briarhurst, finding he was waving a hand in front of her face, eager to have her attention. “I am curious, that is all. One has heard so many things, I do not know what to think about his past.”

A gentleman passed the duke and the group of ladies, dressed wildly like the ancient idea of the Lord of Misrule for Christmas. He offered gifts to the ladies, and apparently, the duke took this as his opportunity to escape, for he slipped away from the group.

“Eleanor?” Mr. Briarhurst’s tone was a little sharper this time. She jerked her head toward him and forced a smile, realizing she had involuntarily allowed her head to turn away as she sought out the duke again.

“You do seem distracted this evening. If having the Duke of Windhaven under your roof is proving complicated, then perhaps I should talk to your father. Make him see sense about having a guest under his roof for so long.”

“There is no need for that.” Eleanor shook her head firmly. “Besides, Christmas is nearly upon us. You know my father’s generous spirit. He would not see a gentleman with nowhere to go at this time of year.”

“His generosity will be his downfall, I fear.” Mr. Briarhurst sighed loudly and picked up a tall claret glass from a passing server, tipping it toward his lips.

“What does that mean?” Eleanor asked, flinching.

“It means that although I have extended my invitation to the Duke of Windhaven tonight, do not think that I trust him.” He lowered his voice and moved toward her, whispering in her ear. Eleanor had to fight the urge to back away from him, hating the feeling of his lips being so close to her.

“I know what he and my friend were like by the end of it. I know the bad blood in the air. How could I forgive it? How could I understand it? I knew my friend, and I trusted him. He was the hurt party, of that I have no doubt. I’m hardly inclined to trust the man who hurt him, am I?” He leaned back and tipped the glass to his lips.

Eleanor said nothing. She only blinked, staring at Mr. Briarhurst in surprise. Something didn’t feel right about this description. For all of her own suspicions of the Duke of Windhaven, she had not seen much to condemn his nature over the last few days that he had stayed with her family. His kindness toward Bea, especially, was a great surprise indeed.

How can a man kind enough to gift Bea an encyclopedia try to swindle his whole family out of their fortune? It doesn’t truly make sense.

“Perhaps he is sorry now for what he has done, the errors of the past,” Eleanor said, reaching for an idea as the Lord of Misrule came toward them. Dressed much like a jester, his face covered by a dark green mask with bells on his wrists and ankles, he drew attention and giggles wherever he went.

He performed a mad cartwheel, then bowed in front of Eleanor and Mr. Briarhurst. He reached into his pocket as if about to bring out another of the gifts he had shared with the other ladies, but Mr. Briarhurst waved him away.

“We do not want any of your superstitions here. Go.” His voice was sharp.

Eleanor stood with her mouth hanging open. It was merely a tradition in this part of the world, a throwback to Christmases gone by, and it was an amusement. Yet Mr. Briarhurst had waved the poor man away as if he was dirt beneath his feet.

“What was that you were saying about the Duke of Windhaven?” Mr. Briarhurst asked distractedly.

“Oh, I was thinking that he must have been very young when the family fell out,” she said in a rush, though she couldn’t concentrate now. She watched the Lord of Misrule as he went to other groups, expressing happy wishes and producing more gifts. “It must have been many years ago. Perhaps he was

merely a boy then and is a man now.”

“You seem most ready to think well of a man I have told you is quite unforgivable, Eleanor. Why do you not trust my word?”

She looked at him sharply, finding the mere idea strange. Why should she think ill of a man just because Mr. Briarhurst had ordered it? Would she not be permitted to make up her own mind about people she met once they were wed? Would she have to defer to him in every regard?

“Mr. Briarhurst,” a deep voice sounded nearby.

Eleanor jerked her head away as the very man they had been speaking of appeared beside him. He bowed to the two of them in turn.

“Thank you for extending the invitation to me tonight,” the duke said, with a manner that was rather cool to her mind, compared to what he had shown to her family.

“You are most welcome.” Mr. Briarhurst forced a similar smile. “Please, enjoy yourself as much as you can. Ah, I believe those bells signal the first of the Christmas tunes for this evening. It will be the ‘Midnight Waltz,’” he explained to Eleanor, as if she needed the explanation. She knew the opening bars as well as he did.

“Then forgive me for stepping on your toes, sir, but I can see Lady Eleanor has an empty dance card on her wrist.” The duke smiled a little as he turned his head to her. “If you have not agreed to dance elsewhere, may I be permitted the next one?”

He held out his hand.

Chapter 8

Say yes. Please, say yes, Eleanor.

Nathaniel couldn't explain it. All he knew was that he had to get Eleanor away from Mr. Briarhurst's side. The sight of her practically pinned to him, elbow to elbow all night, was infuriating, especially when Nathaniel had noted just how much she had been staring at him across the room for the last hour or so.

The Lord of Misrule was the final line in the sand. It seemed Eleanor was not allowed to enjoy the ball very much, or even take part in innocent whimsy, as Mr. Briarhurst had stopped her and ordered the Lord of Misrule away.

"I..." Eleanor hesitated, those captivating blue eyes unblinking as she stared at him. "I would be glad to." She hurried to put down the glass beside her and raised her hand to his.

Nathaniel briefly looked at Mr. Briarhurst, long enough to see he was irked, with a muscle twitching in his increasingly reddening cheeks, but he didn't stop her. He just stared after them. Nathaniel nodded politely and steered Eleanor through the crowded ballroom, toward the dancers.

“You have not smiled once this evening,” he whispered to her as they reached the edge of the dancers.

“You noticed?”

“Any man would be blind not to see it.” He led her onto the middle of the floor as the opening notes of “Midnight Waltz” continued to play, the bell one of the violinists had rung hanging in the air, showing the Christmassy nature of the tune.

They halted in the middle of the floor, bowing and curtsying to one another as the other couples did, then Nathaniel stepped forward and took Eleanor’s waist and her hand. He could have sworn she gasped at the first touch, but perhaps that was just in his imagination. Her cheeks certainly pinkened a little as he led her through the opening figures.

For a minute or so, Nathaniel said nothing. He just escorted her through the dance, so distracted that he thought only of her and the way they moved as a pair. He thought of their fingers sliding together, the curve of her waist beneath his soft touch, and how she kept looking straight at him.

Over the years, many ladies didn’t look at Nathaniel as they danced. Either they were so nervous and awkward about the idea of staring straight at a man that they looked somewhere in the middle of his chest instead, or they were unnerved by his scar and avoided trying to seem as if they were staring at it.

In contrast, Eleanor looked him straight in the eye.

The effect was intense. Nathaniel led her around the floor, finding it so difficult to look away that he perhaps did not do such a good job of avoiding the other dancers. More than once did they nearly collide with another pair, and they would smile and carry on as if nothing had happened.

Eleanor was a fair dancer indeed, but the thing that struck him, the thing that seemed to matter to him most, was the way her hand would grip tighter to his shoulder every few seconds, if he swung her around quite swiftly or if they were in danger of a collision. Never had he had such an intimate dance in his life.

“We must say something to one another,” Eleanor murmured after a few minutes. “It is a very silent dance.”

“I was enjoying it,” he confessed, “but yes, if you wish, let us talk of something.” He knew what he wished to ask. It was a mad thing to speak of, and she may well hate him for asking it, but he couldn’t help it. “Why are you courting such a man?”

“The audaciousness of that question!” She balked as he turned her under his arm and then recaptured her, leading her into the three-time figure once more. “You can predict perfectly well why I am courting him. You heard what my father said earlier this evening. You have stayed in our house long enough, too, to understand what our troubles are.”

“You need money, security, comfort, yes. All good things that are reasonable for a father to want for his daughter,” Nathaniel said in a rush. “Yes, I cannot blame your father for what he wants at all. His love for you, his wish for you to be happy, is driving this. Yet I cannot help wondering if you can find a man with what you need elsewhere. A man who is not so...”

He trailed off as they reached the edge of the dance floor. Mr. Briarhurst was just a few steps away, frowning as he stared at the pair of them with his arms folded.

Nathaniel bit the inside of his mouth to stop himself from laughing as he led Eleanor in the other direction, putting as much distance between them as possible.

“Well, let us just say I can see no evidence that you care for the man, my lady.” He remembered her title this time, realizing in his eagerness to speak to her he had forgotten to use it before.

“I beg your pardon!” Eleanor spluttered, her head leaning away from him a little, yet her body still danced near to him. There was a tension in the air between them, one that had Nathaniel hoping the dance wouldn’t end just yet. “You may be a guest in our home, but that does not mean you know everything about me, Your Grace.”

“Oh? Then prove me wrong,” Nathaniel said in challenge, lifting his chin high. “Tell me of your care for Mr. Briarhurst, of your love for him, anything.” He twirled her once more under his arm and caught her around the waist.

She blinked, her eyes flitting down to his chest before she returned her gaze to his face. She said nothing as they continued to dance, and Nathaniel’s smile grew.

“If you cared for him, you would have turned down my offer of a dance,” he whispered quietly. “Mr. Briarhurst clearly didn’t wish you to accept, yet you did anyway. Why is that, my lady?”

“Because it would do him well to remember I am a woman and not an ornament on his arm,” she said simply with a small smile. “I may need to remind him on occasion.”

Nathaniel laughed at the madness of the idea. Eleanor had a penetrating view of the world, one that was refreshing. Clearly, she knew Mr. Briarhurst’s faults, yet she was courting him anyway.

“Remind him as many times as you need to,” Nathaniel said in a deep tone. “After this dance, I have a feeling he is going to march over here and snatch you up as if we were children and you were his favorite toy.”

She grimaced at the idea but didn't argue. Apparently, she could see the likeness, too.

“You seem to have a strong opinion on who I court, your Grace.” Eleanor quirked an eyebrow high. “You and I have not known each other very long. Why should it matter to you?”

Nathaniel sighed and swept her in the other direction, avoiding a collision with another couple. When she gripped hard on his shoulder, his stomach tightened, a fluttering sensation quaking beneath. It was a good feeling, one he had to clamp down hard upon.

No matter what excitement Eleanor caused, she was not free. She was taken. Nathaniel couldn't afford to develop an affection for her now.

“I have seen enough of courtships in my life to learn something of them,” he whispered to her. They were in the middle of the floor now, scarcely moving, but swaying side to side, dancing so closely together that at a casual glance, someone might have mistaken the pair of them for a courting couple. “They should be about the heart, not about money or treating you as some ornament.”

Her lips flickered into the smallest of smiles.

“An ideal world, Your Grace. A painter can create the world as he thinks it should be, for he has the luxury. Writers can invent such worlds too, but I am neither.” Her chin turned down a little. “I must make do with my lot in life, like any other.”

“You think the world imperfect?”

“I know it to be. Surely you do, too?” she said, lifting her head a little. “After what you have been through?”

He sighed heavily. He had barely told her anything about his life, yet she seemed to have formed some opinion on it regardless.

“For all my troubles, I have had good times, excellent times, days that I will never forget.”

“In America?” She leaned forward, her excitement palpable. “Would you tell me about them, Your Grace?”

“You wish to hear it?”

“Of course!” she said with vigor. “It is a world I have only dreamed of. To hear of what you saw, how you lived, it would be—” She broke off as the music was coming to a close. The smile faded from her lips and her head turned downward.

Slowly, Nathaniel released her, so soon they were just holding hands as they bowed and curtsied. He waited until the final notes were played with the bells ringing out around them, then he drew her toward the edge of the floor and spoke again.

“I will tell you anything you wish to hear about America.”

“You will?” she muttered with excitement.

“It has given you your first full smile all night. Of course I will.”

They stepped off the dance floor and Eleanor turned to face him, her lips parting as if ready to ask her first question, then another appeared beside them. Mr. Briarhurst was clearly not keen on leaving them alone together. However, just as Nathaniel expected Mr. Briarhurst to drag Eleanor away, he was proved wrong.

“Your Grace? May I speak with you for a minute?” The firmness of his tone

showed Mr. Briarhurst would not take kindly to being refused.

Nathaniel nodded in agreement and bowed to Eleanor. As he walked past her, he lowered his voice so only she could hear him.

“This discussion is not over, my lady.”

He could have sworn her head flicked toward him, and perhaps the trace of that smile was still there, but he could no longer see it fully as he walked across the ballroom, following Mr. Briarhurst.

They passed under evergreens and holly boughs that were draped from the ceiling, and walked around servers that were dressed in what appeared to be ice, or some facsimile of it, their hands covered in a dusting of snow. The whole elaborate display was wondrous to see, but as Nathaniel passed the servers, he realized all of this was being paid for with his family’s money. That investment, that income, belonged to Mr. Briarhurst now.

I do not have a claim upon it.

As they reached the side of the room, Mr. Briarhurst offered him a glass of claret with a heavy sigh, but Nathaniel refused, shaking his head.

“I am sorry, you know,” Mr. Briarhurst said, sighing once again, as if his body could not contain such sounds.

“For what?” Nathaniel asked tightly.

“For what has passed between you and your family. I should not be having a part in it, but the fact... well, we do not need to speak of the inheritance again, do we?” He shrugged and lifted his glass to his lips.

“Is this why you wished to speak to me? To commiserate with me?”

“In a way.” Mr. Briarhurst clapped his shoulder. Nathaniel nearly leaped back out of his hold, hating that touch. “Christmas is nearly upon us. Goodwill, forgiveness, and all that. It’s the time of the year for new beginnings, is it not? I wish us to start again, if we can.” He extended his hand for Nathaniel to shake.

Nathaniel stared at that hand, so baffled by the words he didn’t know what to say or think. This was hardly what he had expected, and he didn’t know what to do with it. Every part of his being wanted to hate Mr. Briarhurst. Not only was he the man who owned everything that should have been his, but he was unworthy of the fine woman on his arm.

Tightly, without saying a word, Nathaniel took his hand and shook. He couldn't forgive him, but surely there was no harm in appearing to do so if he intended to challenge in court Mr. Briarhurst's right to the estates?

"Good man," Mr. Briarhurst said with a smile. "Now, if you will excuse me, I will return to my betrothed. You seem rather eager to monopolize her time tonight, do you not?" He added the latter statement like a joke, yet Nathaniel saw the forced nature of the smile before Mr. Briarhurst walked away, leaving Nathaniel alone under the holly boughs.

He jerked his head around, seeking out Eleanor again. She was standing with two friends, her hands wringing together nervously.

It was his way of warning me off, was it not?

Nathaniel realized too late what Mr. Briarhurst's intention had been. It was a subtle way to separate him from Eleanor, then to remind him who she truly 'belonged' to after all.

"This night can end for all I care," Nathaniel muttered darkly and leaned against the wall, seeking out the nearest clock. As soon as the Earl of Wessex wished to leave, Nathaniel would happily go with him.

“I do not understand,” Nathaniel muttered for what felt like the fourth time since he had returned to the library from the ball. The Earl of Wessex had gone straight to bed, and Nathaniel hadn’t paid attention to where Eleanor had gone, for all he’d thought about was reading his brothers’ letters again.

He sat in the armchair by the fire that crackled warmly, his brother’s letters in his lap. His throat was constricted and tight as he read his brother’s words, thinking of the way Mr. Briarhurst had dismissed him that night.

How can that man have everything? How is it I have nothing left from my family after my brother’s kind words here?

“Oh, I am sorry.”

A voice made Nathaniel jump. He leaned forward, dropping the letters out of his lap and onto the hearth rug.

“I didn’t know you were in here.”

It was Eleanor. She stood in the doorway carrying a candle, her loose hair no longer tied in an updo. The effect was shocking to Nathaniel. The soft curls

framed her face, making the line of her chin even more delicate than before.

“It is no matter.” He waved for her to come in. “It is your house. You should not be afraid to go anywhere in it.” He knelt down on the rug and picked up his letters as Eleanor hurried across the room. She went to help him, bending down too and picking up one of the letters. As she passed it to him, she must have seen the name at the bottom of the letter, for she gasped.

“From your brother?”

“They are.” He pulled the letter back sharply from her and sat in the chair once again. “Did you come to read, my lady?”

“No, it is the first day of advent.” She stood tall and moved toward the fireplace. “We have a candle we burn down each day.” She placed the tip of the candle in her grasp to a tall yellowish one on the mantelpiece that had been engraved with gold numbers. As the wick caught first, the stick began to burn down, the wax melting past the ornate number one. “Is all well, Your Grace?”

Nathaniel jerked his head down and gathered the letters in his lap, trying to avoid looking her in the eye. “All is perfectly well.” The lie even sounded obvious to his own ears.

“Is it normal for you to sit here alone and read your brother’s old letters?”

“If it was, what of it?” He shrugged and looked up, his temper quite sharp all of a sudden. To his surprise, he found her smiling quite sadly.

She put down her candle and moved to sit in an armchair on the other side of the fire. “My father did the same after my mother died. He held onto every little thing that was hers, treasured it, cherished it, until he was quite obsessed.”

“I’m not obsessed, it’s just...” Nathaniel didn’t know how to talk of it. How could he? He never spoke of it to anyone. “It just offers some strange comfort to see him speaking to me again.” He laid the letters flat on his lap.

“You’re grieving,” she whispered, as if in surprise.

“Is that a wonder?”

“I suppose not, it’s just, from what I heard—”

“Ah, you have been listening to gossip.” Nathaniel understood now with a slow nod. “Whatever you have heard, my lady, trust me in this. The

relationship between my brother and I was not what others think. To be honest, perhaps it wasn't even what I thought it was either. If I cannot understand it, then certainly no other can."

She slowly nodded and stood once more, moving to his side.

"I am sorry," she whispered, her voice soft. "Loss is never easy to handle, but may I offer some advice?"

"Of course."

"Do not spend your days and nights hiding away in the darkness, dwelling on these written words, Your Grace." She reached for his shoulder. It was so gentle a touch that he inhaled sharply, stunned by it. "You'll find time ticks away all too fast." She offered a sad sort of smile and left the room.

Nathaniel watched her go, staring after her, before jerking his head toward the mantelpiece. The clock the Earl of Wessex had talked of before ticked away. Nathaniel stood and moved toward the clock, watching as time moved on too fast. He turned to the advent candle, and as the golden "one" disappeared, he blew the flame out.

Chapter 9

“This is really not necessary, Your Grace,” Eleanor insisted, hurrying down out of the carriage as they stopped in Covent Garden. “Bea! No running off now.” She caught her sister’s shoulders and dragged her back to the side of the carriage, hurrying to adjust the bonnet ribbons under her sister’s chin and pull the shawl tightly over her shoulders.

A light mist of snow flecked the air and the chill made Eleanor’s nose and cheeks feel as if they had been burnt by the wind. It was hardly a day for traveling, yet it seemed as if Christmas was so near, everyone had risked coming out.

Covent Garden was full of people, and most carried boxes or some sort of cases full of Christmas presents. Ladies tittered nearby in the doorways of shops as, farther down the road, carolers had taken up a place in the center of the Garden Market, their great voices filling the air and competing with the conversation.

“It may not be necessary, but I wish to do it all the same,” the Duke of Windhaven insisted. He nodded at the driver and hesitated, hovering by the driver and the footman. “Surely you two are not going to wait for us here in all this snow?”

“We are happy to do it, Your Grace,” said the driver, although he shivered and rubbed his hands together as he spoke.

“Nonsense.” The duke laughed and shook his head. “There is a teashop there. Go and get yourselves some hot chocolate or something to warm up. Here, take this.” He pushed a few coins into the driver’s hand.

“Your Grace...?” The driver’s voice shook in amazement. “Are you certain?”

“Of course. I would not have you waiting for us in this cold. Anyone would fall ill!” The duke laughed at the idea and waved them on. “Go, warm yourselves inside.”

“See?” Bea hissed, pulling on Eleanor’s sleeve. “Is he not a kind man?”

“I don’t remember saying he wasn’t.”

At Eleanor’s protest, Bea stood on her foot. “You definitely thought it at one stage.”

The duke returned to their sides, rubbing his gloved hands together.

“Right, where shall we go first. Bea? What do you think?”

“The modiste!” Bea said with excitement and ran off through Covent Garden.

“Bea! Not so fast. Please, take care in all this ice and snow.” Eleanor followed her sister, but at a much slower pace. Beside her, the Duke of Windhaven hurried to keep up, laughing deeply. “This is very kind of you, but we are not in need of Christmas presents, your Grace. You should save your money for other things.”

“Nonsense.” He took off his hat as they reached the door of the modiste. “I get to decide what I do with my own money, Lady Eleanor, and the least I can do with it is buy a gift for all of you. You have been very generous in opening your home to me.”

He lowered his voice as they hovered together in the doorway. “Your father has spent money on hosting me, has he not? Even though he has not spoken of it. What kind of man would I be if I didn’t wish to return that kindness?”

Eleanor blinked at him, aware of just how close they were standing. When he was so near, it was quite easy for her to forget the rest of the world. She thought only of the chilly air, the sounds of the Christmas carolers, and of the Duke of Windhaven smiling at her.

“Shall we?” He took the door and opened it wide, allowing her to step inside first.

By the time Eleanor caught up with Bea, she found her sister pulling apart the ribbon display, eagerly trying to find one for Christmas. Eleanor tried to calm her eager spirits but was quite unsuccessful.

She was all too aware of how the Duke of Windhaven watched the two of them, leaning on a table nearby full of handkerchiefs and bolts of cloth.

“I like this one,” Bea declared as she snatched up a crimson ribbon. “It is very Christmassy.”

“Ah, it is silk.” Eleanor grimaced at the sight of the ribbon. “It is indeed beautiful, but...”

It is also too expensive. She could hardly ask the Duke of Windhaven to consider buying Bea such a gift. The mere idea was outrageous!

“Do you like it, Bea?” the duke asked.

“I do.”

“Then you shall have it.” He took the crimson ribbon from her grasp. Delighted, Bea jumped up and down and clapped her hands together.

“What? No,” Eleanor spoke hurriedly. “Your Grace, that is a very generous offer, but even you must admit it is too generous. Consider the price,” she urged, walking around the table and lowering her voice so only he could hear.

“I have considered the price,” he assured her, that smile back in place. It struck her that when he smiled so readily, the scar on his cheek lifted, crinkling his eyes. The effect was quite transforming, and she could have continued staring at him, far longer than was appropriate. “Now, what will you pick, my lady?”

“That is not necessary. I do not need anything.” She waved her hand in the air.

“Oh, is that not beautiful?” Bea declared, running away across the shop.

“She’s off once more.” Eleanor raced after her sister, apologizing when they nearly knocked another lady down in the shop. When they reached the far end of the shop where more materials were displayed on bolts, Eleanor’s pace

slowed. She could see exactly what had so enamored Bea.

A rich dark green silk was pinned around a wooden mannequin shaped to look like a woman. The effect was stunning, the material shining in the white light of the snowy day.

“You would suit it, Eleanor,” Bea said, pulling on the elbow-length sleeve of the gown.

“Me? Far from it.” Eleanor shook her head.

Besides, we have not bought gowns in a long time. Her father had purchased one for her last year, and that was the last gown she had been given. That one was also second-hand, for it was all they could afford.

“Come away, dear. As beautiful as it is, it is not for us.” Eleanor tried to steer Bea away from the gown, but she would not be moved. To Eleanor’s dismay, her body didn’t seem in a hurry to move either. She admired the way the light shimmered on the silk and the low cut of the bodice, quite dramatic compared to many other empire-line gowns. It was a beautiful thing indeed.

“You like it,” a deep voice observed.

Eleanor snapped her head toward the Duke of Windhaven. He stood nearby, leaning on a wall with his arms folded.

“Naturally. It is very beautiful.” She waved her hand in the air. “Yet we...” She looked purposefully at him, hoping he would get her message without her having to say it aloud in such a busy place.

We cannot afford it.

To her surprise, the duke’s smile grew wider. “Perhaps the modiste could fit you for one. What do you say, Bea? The green gown for your sister? We shall have to find one for you, too. Now, which material is your favorite?”

“Ooh, I like this one.” Bea ran toward another table where a crimson satin matched the color of the ribbon she had selected quite perfectly.

Feeling as if her entire body had turned to the ice beyond the windows, Eleanor stumbled toward the duke and tugged on his arm, pulling him to a halt so he could not follow Bea.

“What are you doing?” she asked so only he could hear him.

“I told you. I am here to buy you Christmas presents. It is the least I can do.”

“The least?” she spluttered. “This is far too much. A ribbon is kind enough as it is, and a gown... goodness, it is so expensive, Your Grace.”

“I can worry about the cost,” he said, stepping toward her.

Once more, she felt that tension in the air between them. When he came so near, it was easy not to think of anything else. Now, she could wear the cologne he was wearing. Sandalwood hung in the air, but it was mixed with the scents of the Christmas loaf they had shared that morning over breakfast, cinnamon and nutmeg.

“I would not offer if I could not afford it.”

Eleanor tilted her head to the side in surprise, realizing an error she had made. Knowing that the Duke of Windhaven had not inherited his family’s fortune, she had presumed he’d had little money to his name. Yet the duke had presented himself to her father as someone reasonably successful in business.

“How successful has your business been across the pond?” she asked, folding her arms. He matched her stance and smiled a little, almost mischievously. “You said you’d tell me anything I wished to hear about the Americas.”

“I will happily tell you all, but ask me about my travels, about the adventure, for those are the things you really wish to know.” He leaned toward her, dropping his voice further. “Let us forget money. It is a dull subject, really.” His lips had come so close to her ear that she trembled with a sort of excitement.

What is happening to me?

“Ah, there, Bea. That’s a beautiful one. Shall we see you fitted for the gown?” he asked and walked away, following Bea to the nearest table.

Eleanor stared after the pair of them, uncertain what to think or feel anymore. All she knew was that in their conversation, somehow, the duke had managed to place a sample of the green silk into her hands without her noticing. She gripped tightly to it now, admiring the shimmer in the wintry light.

Nathaniel waited with Bea on the other side of the curtain. Already, she had been fitted for her red dress. The modiste had assured them it would take a few days to prepare, but she would send it to the estate by the end of the week.

“You cannot sit still for your excitement.” Nathaniel laughed as Bea bounced up and down on the stool beside him. She had tied her new ribbon around her wrist and couldn’t stop looking down to admire it.

It struck him that something so simple as being bought gifts was a revelation to Eleanor and Bea. Their father clearly couldn’t afford it, and the more time they spent at this shop, the more Nathaniel was beginning to realize that Mr. Briarhurst couldn’t have bought Eleanor anything either.

Strange, why would he not buy a gift for the woman he is courting? He certainly has the money to do so now!

The realization made Nathaniel even more confident in his determination. These things were hardly expensive, and if they could bring Eleanor and her sister such smiles, why wouldn’t he want to do it?

“There, my lady. You can step out now,” the modiste’s voice called from the other side of the curtain.

The thick blue curtain was swept aside and Eleanor stepped forward, trailing some of the silk behind her. Cinched at the waist and falling low in deep swaths of emerald green, it was a stunning gown indeed. The square neckline was rather deep and revealed a hint of her curves and the delicacy of her collarbone.

Nathaniel admired how beautiful Eleanor looked in the gown so much that he quite forgot himself.

“I think that’s a good thing,” Bea said.

“Bea.” Eleanor’s tone was reproving.

Bea was pointing straight at Nathaniel. “Shall I do the same?” she asked, and she dropped her jaw, ogling Eleanor.

“Ha!” Nathaniel tipped his head back and laughed warmly. “Was that how I looked? Then my expression matched my thoughts. Lady Eleanor, you are quite stunning in that gown.”

She jerked her head toward him, wringing her hands, clearly surprised. Her cheeks pinkened so much he was beginning to wonder if she’d ever had a compliment before in her life.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her voice gentle as the modiste hurried behind her, pinning the hem of the gown. “Yet we should not buy it, Your Grace.”

“This again.” He shook his head. “I am buying it. It is one of your Christmas presents.”

“One of them?” She stepped forward so suddenly that she nearly pulled the modiste off her knees behind her. “Goodness, surely you do not mean to buy us any more?”

“Leave that with me.” Nathaniel couldn’t take the smile off his face. To see Eleanor so shocked and Bea so happy, he rather thought he would have paid any cost. “Have you not been given a gift before, Lady Eleanor?” he asked, standing and moving toward her. It allowed him to speak more quietly so that neither the modiste nor Bea could hear him.

“Not like this,” she said in a rush. “These gifts... they are quite mad in their extravagance.”

“This is not extravagant.” He shook his head. “Extravagant would be buying you a whole new carriage with four horses to pull it.”

“Four horses!” she repeated, laughing and placing her hands on her hips. “Exactly how much money did you make in America?”

He smiled and raised his eyebrows, showing he didn't intend to give anything away.

“Now, I shall buy the dresses, then shall we go and have hot chocolate to warm up, Bea?” he offered.

Bea was already on her feet and running toward the door.

By the time Eleanor had changed again and joined him at the door, Bea was so excited she could not stand still. The three of them walked down the road together with snow increasingly settling, being careful where they walked so that they did not fall over.

The crowd of carolers had grown larger and on a set of stone steps nearby, there were two acrobats performing tricks, with one dressed like a Lord of Misrule and the other clothed fully in false ice, their hair and cheeks as white as the snow that fell around them.

“You have been too generous,” Eleanor whispered beside him as her sister ran ahead and started dancing with the acrobats.

Nathaniel offered his arm to Eleanor when she slipped on the ice. She took it so quickly he had to clamp down on that fluttering feeling in his stomach once again.

“You are fond of speaking plainly, so let me do the same. These are no great cost to me, and the chance to see you both smile is its own reward. Yet, while we are on the subject of money, let me ask you another thing.”

He stopped walking, giving Bea more time to dance with the acrobats but also taking more time to talk to Eleanor alone. “Your courtship with Mr. Briarhurst. I already know it is about money, but let me ascertain something for certain. Is it for money *alone*, or do you have any affection for the man at all?”

“Why do you ask?” Eleanor said, adopting that polite and proper tone he had heard from her the first night they met. When she jerked her chin away, when he had first known her, he would have mistaken it for being haughty, but he now knew her well enough to read the true feelings. She was hiding behind a mask.

Even now, with her free hand, she pulled at the edge of her bonnet, pretending to cover herself from the falling snow, but she was truly trying to mask her face from him.

“Because if there is a chance of you loving that man, then I have no right to speak at all. Believe me, this is the last we shall say on the subject.” At his words, she looked sharply toward him, her lips parting. “But if you tell me now you have no affection for the man, no care, no chance of love, and you do it all for your father’s sake, for this wish to make the family secure, then

tell me so at once.”

“Why?” she whispered. “Why do you wish to know?”

“A friend in need, my lady. That’s what you and your family are now to me.”

For a minute, he thought she wouldn’t answer him. She looked away and watched her sister laughing in the snow with the acrobats before she turned back to face him.

“I like him about as much as I like the crickets in summer. They are irksome things, but I can live with them,” she explained in a rush.

“Then you have made up my mind.” He hooked her arm further through his, holding her near as they continued to walk toward the teashop.

“Made up your mind? On what score?”

“That I must do everything in my power to help your father rebuild his fortune. No one should marry someone they do not love, neither should they tie themselves to someone they merely tolerate.” He looked at her. “Forever is a long time to be bound to a heart that you do not care for, my lady.”

She smiled rather sadly, and her lips parted. Whatever she had been about to say though, he did not discover, for Bea returned to their side and started excitedly talking of the hot chocolates they were to share.

Chapter 10

“Where is your father?”

Eleanor stepped into the carriage. The snow was falling more thickly now, a ridge forming at the edge of the drive where the groundskeepers had piled up the snow. Eleanor shivered as she pulled her thick fur pelisse around her shoulders.

“He is unwell with a migraine,” Eleanor explained, looking toward the Duke of Windhaven across the carriage. It was dark already, and the one lantern that swung from the top of the carriage swayed as they were jolted forward. It cast streaks of apricot light and shadow across the duke’s face, making those sharp features seem softer somehow. “He has asked if we will go alone. Do you mind?”

“Of course not.” He shook his head. “I’ll happily escort you there. Though I have a feeling when we arrive at Mr. Briarhurst’s, he’ll eagerly take over that duty himself.”

“Indeed, he may,” she said with a sigh and leaned back in the carriage. She had no wish to go to this dinner party, but she’d had no choice. Mr. Briarhurst’s invitation had come two days ago, and in that letter was another smaller note for her. Mr. Briarhurst had made it plain that tonight was a key

business opportunity for him.

It may have been styled as a Christmas dinner party, but instead, he had many businessmen coming. It was his time to shine and impress these men, and for some reason, he considered her part of that bargain.

“You look as if you would rather go home instead,” he said, reading her thoughts.

“How is it you can guess my mind?” she asked. “I have hardly spoken of it.”

“Perhaps the more I know you, the easier I find you to read, my lady.”

“How infuriating.” She folded her arms. “Because I am just finding you increasingly enigmatic.”

He laughed warmly and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Ask me anything and I will tell you.”

She leaned forward too, rather excited by the prospect. The last couple of days, ever since they had been to Covent Garden, she had longed to be alone with the Duke of Windhaven again but hadn’t found the opportunity. He’d

either been in conference with her father, or Bea was pestering him to play pirates with her again. Now, Eleanor had the luxury of being alone with him and there was so much she wanted to ask.

“Tell me about America.”

The first question that fell from her lips clearly entertained him, for his smile grew wide. “What do you wish to know?”

“Everything!”

“You long for adventure, do you not? A world beyond that which you know.”

“Is that so surprising? Is it even unique?” she asked. They had both shifted and there was now just the barest of gaps between the pair of them in the carriage. A chaperone might have insisted they lean back, but Eleanor had no inclination to do so. She felt safe with the duke, and strangely, a smile was never far away these days. “I am sure lots of people must long to explore to see wonders that they read of only in books. To feel... free.”

“Freedom.” He looked down, that smile faltering a little. “There is a price that comes with freedom, you know.”

“What’s that?”

“Loneliness.” He looked up once more. “Do not misunderstand me, my lady. I have adored my time in the New World. It has thrilled me every step of the way. The adventure, all of it! Still, there are times when you sit there and wish to talk about it with someone. To make plans with another, and yet you cannot.”

“You sound as if you should get yourself married, Your Grace.”

“Ha! Married? Me?” He sat back on the coach bench.

Eleanor couldn’t explain the tightness in her chest. For some reason, she eagerly wished to know what the duke thought of marriage. Did he ever intend to marry? Or would he remain a bachelor?

“I have not thought of it.” He shook his head and looked away. “We have changed subject. Shall I tell you of America instead?”

She tried to hide her disappointment, wanting to return to the matter of marriage, but nodded all the same.

For their whole journey, the duke described America to her. He talked of the great cities that were being built, the industry, the excitement, how these places seemed to have a living and breathing heartbeat. He told her too of the great deserts and stretches of arid land in the west, of the mines where gold could be found deep down in the earth. The opportunity, the taste of hope, seemed to hang in the air.

“It is a place of possibilities,” Eleanor whispered as the carriage came to a stop.

“In every way.” The duke reached for the door and opened it wide.

Disappointed that they had to end their discussion so soon, she stepped down, pulling the pelisse tighter around her shoulders. When the duke offered his arm to her, she took it without hesitation, indulging in the warmth that came off him as they walked toward Mr. Briarhurst’s house.

“You could see it someday,” the duke whispered to her. “You know that, do you not?”

“I do not imagine Mr. Briarhurst is keen on the idea of travel.”

They halted on the top step in front of the great door.

“Perhaps not,” the duke said in a low tone. “But if your father’s business picks up and I am able to help him, then perhaps you will not have to be betrothed by Christmas after all, my lady.”

“Wait... what did you say?” She jerked her head toward him, but the door opened and the butler greeted them with a deep bow, making any further conversation impossible. They stepped inside and the butler took her pelisse and the duke’s frock coat before the duke took her arm again and escorted her into the great parlor.

It seemed Mr. Briarhurst was spending more and more money on lavish decorations. Rather than the evergreen boughs that Eleanor had brought in with Bea from the outside to decorate her own house, there was a myriad of white and silver decorations across this room. Even the candles seemed to have been gilded in silver. The entire effect was of frost, as if a wintry gale had passed through the room and left it glittering.

“Why do I have the sudden urge to shiver, I wonder?” the duke whispered to her.

Eleanor couldn’t stifle her laugh.

Mr. Briarhurst approached fast, striding through his other guests and toward

the pair of them.

“Ah, you’re here at last.” He didn’t even look at the duke, something that made Eleanor’s stomach knot. He took Eleanor’s hand and threaded it through his own arm, as good as jerking her away from the duke. She looked back at the duke in surprise and he raised his eyebrows, showing he had seen the exact same thing. “Come, Eleanor, there are some people I wish to introduce you to.”

Eleanor walked away, more than once glancing back in the duke’s direction, longing to speak with him again about America. Once when they caught one another’s eye, he winked at her. It was a private moment across the room, one that warmed her so much, she couldn’t quite stand still and was in danger of dropping the wine glass in her clutches.

Eleanor grew bored fast. More than once did she separate herself from Mr. Briarhurst with the intention of talking with Sophie and Linora, but Mr. Briarhurst came for her again as if she was his property, collecting her in the crook of his arm and escorting her away. It became so obvious that at one point, Sophie mimicked the action with Linora, sweeping her away, too.

All around them, conversation seemed to be focused on one thing, much to Mr. Briarhurst’s dismay.

“Or, Mr. De Winter, I wished to speak to you about your shipping industry in France,” Mr. Briarhurst began, but the man he was speaking to was already

shaking his head.

“Ha! How can you talk of business tonight, my good man? When you have practically invited scandal into your living room?”

“Scandal?” Eleanor repeated in surprise.

“Well, the Duke of Windhaven, of course.” Mr. De Winter waved a hand toward the duke across the room. Eleanor followed that look. When she saw Sophie and Linora talking to the duke, she felt a pang of jealousy creeping through her stomach.

What is wrong with me? Why do I wish I was with them?

Yet it was exactly what she did long for. She would much rather have been a part of their conversation than this one.

“To think you have invited that man after the fallout with his family,” Mr. De Winter went on. “What’s more, you have everything that should have been his.”

“Should have been?” Mr. Briarhurst repeated.

Eleanor looked down at the grasp he had on his wine glass. The knuckles had turned white from the sheet pressure of his grip, the sinews in the back of his hand obvious.

“Well, it hardly happens often, does it?” Mr. De Winter chuckled, clearly in his cups as he swayed side to side, the claret in his glass in danger of falling out beyond the rim. “A man being disinherited from not only a fortune so vast, but one that is so linked to the family. I knew the man’s father, you know.” He added these words to Eleanor, talking directly to her. “He was a proud man, even arrogant.”

“We should not be talking so,” Mr. Briarhurst said tightly.

“Oh? What does it matter now? He is not here to hear me.” Mr. De Winter chuckled and carried on. “In fact, he was such a proud man, believing in the pureness of his blood, the family lineage and all that, the mere idea that he would have approved of one son disinheriting the other quite baffles me. For all the arguments that existed between them, I would have thought he’d put that above everything else.”

“Truly?” Eleanor hung on his words, quite fascinated by the idea.

“I knew the family better than anyone,” Mr. Briarhurst abruptly interjected,

looking so uncomfortable that he stared at his glass rather than Mr. De Winter at all. “He was disinherited for a reason, believe me. I saw the will, after all. I know what my friend thought of his brother.”

“I beg your pardon?” Eleanor jerked her head toward him, in danger of dropping her own glass. “I thought you said you were not aware of the late duke’s intentions before he died?”

“Not exactly.” He shifted his weight between his feet, looking over the heads of his guests. “I saw some of the will, so I knew some of his intentions, if not all.”

That doesn’t make sense.

Eleanor continued to stare at Mr. Briarhurst, but he would no longer look at her.

“Well, it’s a difficult situation all around.” Mr. De Winter sighed. “I am at least glad you are taking pains to heal the bridge by inviting him to so many events, Mr. Briarhurst. I imagine you will be letting the new duke take some of his personal effects from the houses, too.”

“I beg your pardon?” Mr. Briarhurst looked outraged at the idea, swaying on his feet almost as much as Mr. De Winter was doing.

“That is a good idea,” Eleanor said with sudden enthusiasm. “There must be things that are not of monetary value that would belong to the duke in those houses of yours. Matters relating to his childhood, perhaps. Old toys, books, and much more.”

“I was given everything in the will.” Mr. Briarhurst looked at her now. Never had Eleanor felt so pinned to the spot than by that gray gaze. She had no liking for it. He had turned as cold as the ice-white decorations around him suggested the room was.

“They can mean nothing to you,” she said, her voice soft. “Yet such things would mean everything to him.”

“It would be a kindness indeed.” Mr. De Winter stepped forward and clapped Mr. Briarhurst on the shoulder good-naturedly. “Now, there’s a good chap. Nice to see you are doing so much to fix things.” He walked away as if Mr. Briarhurst had already agreed to let the duke back into the house.

“But...” Mr. Briarhurst trailed off and looked at the retreating figure of Mr. De Winter, clearly disappointed he did not get a chance to talk about the French shipping industry. “If you would excuse me, Eleanor.”

He walked away, and she expected he would chase after Mr. De Winter, to

try to ensnare him in a matter of business instead. To her surprise, he marched toward the Duke of Windhaven instead and took him away from Sophie and Linore.

Eleanor crossed toward her friends.

“Ah, there you are. Have you become a limpet stuck to Mr. Briarhurst’s side yet?” Sophie comically stuck herself to the side of Linora, who repeatedly tried to shake their friend off without success.

“What is going on?” Eleanor whispered, her attention entirely elsewhere.

Mr. Briarhurst had taken the duke to the side of the room. She burned with curiosity to know what they were speaking about, for whatever it was, it appeared to be getting quite sharp, almost unfriendly. Mr. Briarhurst waved his hand in the air, and with that motion, the conversation was at an end. He walked away, back toward his other guests, and in particular toward Mr. De Winter.

Eleanor stared at the duke, watching what he would do next.

He made no effort to speak to anyone. He stared at Mr. Briarhurst’s back for a minute, then turned sharply on his heel and retreated from the room.

Eleanor followed him.

“Eleanor? Where are you going?” Linora called.

“It looks like my escort has decided it’s time to leave. I’ll see you both soon.” Eleanor waved at the pair of them and hurried after the duke.

She caught up with him in the entrance hall where he was snatching his frock coat off a coat stand in anger, making the material whip the air loudly.

“Your Grace?”

“Eleanor.” He turned to face her, pulling on his hat next. “I must leave. I cannot stand this anymore. I am sorry for it. There is no need for you to leave so soon. I can send the carriage back for you later.”

“Nonsense. I am happy to leave now.” She reached for her fur pelisse and pulled it on over her shoulders. “What has happened?”

“That man... that odious rat...” he muttered under his breath as he strode out

of the house.

The snow was getting stronger now, the flecks so large that they clumped in Eleanor's eyelashes and she had to bat them away.

"What is it? What did he say to you?" she called to be heard above the whistling wind.

The duke opened the carriage door, and, in his anger, she expected him to march straight into the carriage. He did not; he turned and offered his hand to help her inside first.

Even in his anger, he's a gentleman.

"What is it?" she asked again as they both sat down in the carriage. This time, they didn't sit on opposite benches, but beside one another. "What has happened?"

"He was delighting himself in his victory," the duke said hurriedly, his voice venomous and tight.

"He reminded me how I didn't truly belong in this crowd anymore, and that

with so few assets to my name, as he now has them all, it wouldn't surprise him if I had to leave for America again so soon. He reminded me that my brother did not want me here, which is why he left me no scrap of land. Some invitation tonight." He cursed under his breath. "I think he only asked me here to crow over me in his success."

"Your Grace, I am so sorry." Strangely, Eleanor didn't doubt his words. Considering Mr. Briarhurst's wish for propriety, she may have wished to doubt he would be so outspoken, but the duke was clearly not lying, and she had seen how riled Mr. Briarhurst was before he went to speak to the duke.

"I truly thought..." The duke looked away, pausing. "It's as if the blood tie was broken completely. As if my brother and I were not connected by anything at all."

It was a small insight into his life, one Eleanor was desperate to hang onto. She raised a hand and placed it softly on the duke's arm. He snatched his gaze toward it but made no other movement.

"I thought things were different this last year." He whispered so quietly that she wondered if he was almost afraid to admit it aloud. "I thought my brother and I were close again, that he understood me. How wrong I was." He shook his head and blinked hard. "I have lost him for good, and now I fear this last year, I never knew the real him at all."

"I am so sorry, Your Grace." She didn't know what more to say, so she did

the only thing she could do. She moved her hand from his arm to find his gloved palm and slid it against her own. He looked surprised, staring down at their clasped hands, but he didn't pull back. Instead, his fingers curled around their own and he held tight.

They said nothing more between them on the carriage ride home, but neither did they part. They stayed hand in hand and Eleanor offered silent comfort. When it came to a loss such as his, there was nothing anyone could say. She could only be there to support him.

When they reached the house, he still didn't let go but escorted her toward the house with their hands locked together.

What does this truly mean? It was a question that plagued Eleanor as they walked back into the house together.

Chapter 11

“You wish me to come with you?” Eleanor asked, stilling in the entrance hall.

Nathaniel tried not to shift his weight between his feet or look nervous. All morning, he had helped Eleanor and Bea trail fresh evergreens through the hall, with holly and mistletoe hanging from the candelabras. The project had been wonderful, a chance to distract himself from the task that he had to do today. Yet now the time was upon him, and he found he didn’t want to go alone.

It seemed like the obvious conclusion to invite Eleanor to accompany him.

“Would you?” he asked, his voice deep.

The Earl of Wessex passed through the other side of the hall, carrying paper chains that Bea had made.

“Shall we put them up in the music room?”

“Yes!” Bea cried eagerly, following him. “Put them through the harp so Eleanor cannot play it anymore. She’ll thank me for that.”

Laughter followed the pair of them as they disappeared into the music room. Nathaniel stepped closer to Eleanor.

“I also have to pick up your father’s gift for Christmas, so I’d be grateful for the help with that.”

“Of course. I’ll happily come.” Eleanor hurried toward the coat stand, collecting her fur pelisse and her gloves.

Nathaniel looked down at those suede gloves and noted, not for the first time, that they were the only pair of winter gloves she owned. They had clearly been worn for many years, for they were beginning to fray around the cuffs.

Perhaps I could buy her just one more gift for Christmas, something else to make her smile.

“Right, I am ready.” Eleanor nodded and Nathaniel asked the butler to assure Lord Wessex they’d return in a few hours, then they left.

In the carriage, Eleanor asked him eagerly about America and Nathaniel was all too happy to satisfy her curiosity, telling her tales about the great swaths of dry land in the east, the excitement of it all, the animals, and how he had once had to run from a black bear in the forests of Washington.

When the carriage came to a stop on the outskirts of London, near Sussex, Nathaniel gestured to a large building he knew well. Eleanor perched on the very edge of the coach bench, staring at the building in wonder.

“What is this place?” she asked, her voice soft.

“Somewhere that shall provide the perfect gift for your father. I will be back momentarily.” He stepped down from the carriage, leaving Eleanor inside. She seemed eager to follow and pushed her head through the window.

“Did you need my help carrying this gift or not?” she reminded him.

“It may have been an excuse for your company. Is that so bad?” he asked, his insides warming as she grinned.

“You do not need an excuse for that.”

He smiled at her and walked away toward the building.

If only I could have your company all the time.

It was something he was quickly beginning to realize over the last couple of weeks. He liked Eleanor, far more than he should have done, especially considering she was about to marry another man. Yet Nathaniel couldn't help himself. If it meant he had to spend as much time with her as he could before she was lost to the company of Mr. Briarhurst, so be it.

He went inside and collected his gift for Lord Wessex, tucking the small box into the pocket of his frock coat, then he left again and returned to the carriage. For the rest of the journey into Sussex, Eleanor plagued him with playful questions, trying to figure out what was in the box, but he never gave her any clue.

Soon enough, he fell quiet.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Eleanor asked, leaning toward him.

“I can see the manor.” He sighed deeply. “This is no easy thing, Eleanor.”

He couldn't turn his gaze away from the window of the carriage as his family's manor house appeared. With snow now having fallen so thickly, the carriage struggled down the driveway. They were jolted side to side, making it rather difficult for Nathaniel to keep clinging to the door with his body veered forward so he could see the building.

Mr. Briarhurst had clearly wasted no time in making changes. Scaffolding was erect over the entire west wing, and as he stared at the frontage, Nathaniel realized something that felt like a kick in the gut.

“He's changing the façade.”

“What?” Eleanor asked beside him.

“It's a Tudor building. Tudor brickwork, red and white, but look at it now?” He didn't even wait for the carriage to stop.

“Your Grace!” Eleanor called after him as he flung himself out of the door. Fortunately, it was going at such a slow speed that he merely had to run a little as he hit the snowy ground to stay standing.

He exhaled heavily, his breath clouding the air as he stared at the white pillars that were being erected.

“He’s changing it entirely,” he muttered in a low tone. “He’s making it a Palladian building. This building is centuries old. Why would he change it? I do not understand.”

When he’d first received the letter from Mr. Briarhurst to say he’d be allowed to take a few things from the house, his heart had leaped with joy. Now, he was not so certain it was a good thing.

An arm took his and he looked down to see Eleanor had also descended from the carriage. She threaded her arm through his, an act of comfort.

“Everything I know about Mr. Briarhurst suggests he is a man of fashion,” she said in a wary tone, her eyes darting over the house. “He is a man who craves good opinions. I am not sure he has any true respect for the traditions or for the history of your home.”

“Former home,” he reminded her, sighing deeply. “Thank you for coming, Eleanor.”

She smiled softly. She could have no idea what that smile did for him, nor her presence. It was strange. Being here, he felt cold, but fortunately, no longer alone. As long as she stayed beside him.

“Let’s get this over with then,” he mumbled and walked up the front porch to the house.

He knocked on the door, which was quickly answered by a young man. The butler that had once belonged to his family clearly didn’t work here anymore.

“Ah, yes, the master said you would be coming.” The young man, despite his shorter height, managed to lift his nose so high he managed to look down on Nathaniel.

“Yes,” Nathaniel said tightly.

Eleanor cleared her throat, a subtle sign perhaps that Nathaniel should make more of an effort.

She is right. No good comes from making enemies here.

“Where am I permitted to go?” Nathaniel asked, trying to soften his tone.

“We have had any personal effects moved to the garden room.” The butler bowed and led the way through the house.

As Nathaniel followed, with Eleanor on his arm, he looked back and forth constantly. Many things were changing. His family's portraits had been taken down off the wall, even one of his brother.

"It's gone," he muttered.

"What has?" Eleanor asked.

"It doesn't matter."

Nathaniel still stared at the painting that now replaced his brother's portrait. It was some fashionable landscape of a pastoral landscape, a Constable, perhaps.

Why would he get rid of a portrait of David?

Two walls were being knocked through between the small parlors to create one vast living room. Nathaniel turned his back on it, hating the sight of so much change, then followed the butler into the garden room.

“God’s wounds,” he murmured to himself. “Everything is different.”

This room had once been full of the grandest potted palms and lemon trees. It was his mother’s passion to see the outdoors brought in, and the space had once been a wonder to behold. For all of his mother’s faults, Nathaniel had felt this was the one room in which she could truly be herself.

When surrounded by the scents of the lemons, running her fingers through the long leaves of the palms, she’d been content, a serene smile on her face. The vast sunlight through the tall windows had bathed her face and she’d seemed happy.

Now, the room was bare. All the plants had been removed and in their places were a few crates of personal items and old paintings that had been taken down off the wall.

“I shall leave you to look, Your Grace. Call if you need help.” The butler bowed and managed to bestow another one of those withering looks before he left.

The moment he was gone, Nathaniel released Eleanor and jumped toward the paintings. He searched through them as hurriedly as he could. They were all large and difficult to move, but he at last found the one of David. He leaned it against the window and gazed at the face of his brother, feeling his eyes prick.

“Your brother?” Eleanor whispered softly, moving to his side.

“Yes.” His voice was husky with his attempt to hold back tears. “I will take it. I cannot believe he would remove it from the wall.” He turned to the other paintings and searched through them, manically now.

“Oh!” Eleanor gasped and jumped out of the way when he managed to knock to the floor two landscapes that he couldn’t have cared less about. At last, he found a painting that mattered to him very much.

Four people stood within the large canvas, staring out. His mother and father were side by side, her hand on his arm as he took center stage in the portrait. She had the soft smile on her face that Nathaniel associated with this room. In front of her were David and Nathaniel, when they were just boys and no taller than her hip. David was holding Nathaniel’s hand.

“I remember this day,” Nathaniel said to Eleanor, moving the painting beside the other. “It was long before everything went wrong. We were happy then.” He sat down on one of the cases, perfectly still, as his eyes flitted over the painting.

“You look happy,” Eleanor observed, moving to sit beside him on another case. “A true family.”

“We were.”

“Look at how your mother holds your shoulder. She quite adores you. You can see it.”

“She did once.” Nathaniel sighed deeply, knowing how much had changed. “It was before I grew up and saw what my father was doing, though. Before... I ripped us all apart.”

“I cannot imagine this boy ripping anything apart,” she whispered, pointing at the painting. “He’s like you now. When he smiles, he has kind eyes.”

“That might be the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me, my lady.” He looked at her and they laughed softly together. It was so pleasant, a wondrous feeling, for his heart to be lifted in this room when he was fighting the ghosts of the past.

Thank God she came.

It might have been too hard without her.

“When I was a child, I idolized my father,” he said slowly, deciding that perhaps it was time he told her the truth. She should know. Someone should know the truth. “I believed him to be the greatest of men.”

“The mistake of many a child, I fear.” She shifted on the box, staring at the picture of his father. “We believe our parents to be infallible.”

“Precisely, and yet he wasn’t.” He shook his head. “I had a good education in land management, and the more time I spent with the tenants on the estate, the more I realized my father was bleeding them dry. He was making the farmers’ lives miserable, and for what? Just so he could have a few extra coins every year to line his purse.” He muttered a few curses that made Eleanor flinch in surprise. “I’m sorry for my language.”

“Do not be.” Her voice was soft. “It’s quite something to glimpse into your heart for a change, Your Grace.”

He fought another one of the smiles she tempted from him.

“I spoke out one day.” He stood up and moved toward the painting, laying his hand on the top of the frame. “I told my father and brother what was happening on the land, told my father it had to change, that we had a responsibility to the people to take care of them. He accused me of putting strangers above blood. What started as a small argument, one we could have

moved past, got worse and worse.”

The frame was cold to the touch. “My mother started retreating from me. She always did everything my father asked of her. She may have loved me, but she couldn’t forgive me for speaking against him. David, well, he said later he was perhaps just too afraid of our father and failed to see the truth. Oh, I could see the truth.”

He lifted his head and looked straight at Eleanor.

“Poor harvests were starving our tenants, and my father made no effort to improve the land and protect them. People died in the cold winters, and he wouldn’t pay for a physician or a doctor to go and see them. One autumn, I rolled up my sleeves and helped with the harvest, for there was no way they would get it done otherwise, they needed the men. Outraged, my father called me home. Called me a disgrace to the family.”

“A disgrace?” Eleanor’s spine went rigid. “How is it a disgrace to help your tenants?”

“That was my question exactly. He cast me out of the house, said if I wasn’t going to act like one of them, then I was no longer one of them. I remember the day it happened.” Nathaniel’s tone grew deeper and a little shakier. “My mother cried the whole time but said nothing. I think now she was lost for words. My brother sat on the staircase and watched us, saying nothing either. Yet he fidgeted constantly, unable to sit still.”

He focused on the paintings, looking at all the faces reflected there. Strangely, despite all the anger he'd felt at his father over the years, he still wanted the painting. "I'll have these pictures. If Mr. Briarhurst has no care of them, I'll happily take them."

A soft touch to his shoulder startled him and he looked around. Eleanor had stood off the box and moved toward him.

"I had no idea this was why you left for America. Everyone speaks so ill of you, Your Grace. I'm so sorry." She looked on the verge of tears. "It's awful... that this is how it happened and yet..." Her breath hitched.

Nathaniel released the paintings and reached inside the pocket of his frock coat, pulling out a handkerchief. Without thinking, he wiped away the single tear that escaped down her cheek. She stared at him, blinking, clearly fighting more tears.

"You have a good heart, my lady." He tried to be formal, knowing what he had just done was anything but. "You feel for my pain."

"How could I not?" she whispered. "It's awful!"

“I thought it was getting better is the strange thing.” He shifted and moved to stand in front of the painting that was of his brother alone.

“This last year, David had started writing to me. It was slow at first, both of us perhaps a bit tentative, just trying to get to know one another. Then one day, it all changed. David said he understood. He apologized for not challenging our father, for sitting there on the staircase and letting it all just happen.” He shook his head. “It was never his responsibility anyway, but he felt it keenly, nevertheless. I honestly thought he understood me, and I thought...”

He couldn't form the words anymore. As he stared at the face of his brother, it was all too easy to think that David would walk back through the door and call to him. Would he embrace him? Would he call out and ask to know about his travels? Would they talk as they had in their letters? Or would David have revealed why he had resented Nathaniel so much in the end? Why had David felt the need to disinherit him?

“I didn't think he hated me this much by the end of it.” Nathaniel released the painting and stepped back.

Eleanor took his arm and rested her head upon his shoulder, a silent sign of comfort. He raised his hand and laid it over hers, needing the touch in that moment.

“Maybe we never can truly know another person’s mind,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “If only we could.”

“Yes, indeed. Before we leave, there’s someone else I’d like to see. Someone who might be able to tell me something more.”

Chapter 12

Eleanor trailed behind the duke as they reached the tenants' cottages. The snow was heavier here, and he constantly reached back toward her, taking her hand to help her through. His effort to be so considerate to her when he was going through such pain was touching indeed.

"Thank you," she said as they stopped in front of the tenants' cottage. "Who lives here?"

"I do not know if he is still here, but once, there was a man who lived here I called a great friend." The duke strode forward and knocked on the door before returning to Eleanor's side. "We played together as children on the estate, not that my father approved of that. We were great friends when I started helping with the land, but then I was sent away."

"Could you not have stayed in touch?" Eleanor felt foolish for asking the question as the duke raised his eyebrows at her. "I'm sorry, I was not thinking." The farmer probably couldn't read or write. The chances of staying in touch with a man in America would then be impossible.

The door opened.

“What you want?” A thin man stepped forward, his coat hanging off him. Even inside, he wore a thick woolen hat. His fair hair was loose about his ears and his jowls. The rather sharp question faded away and those big brown eyes widened. “I do not believe it.” He stumbled out of the house, toward the duke. “Nathaniel?”

“How are you, Trevor?” the duke asked, moving toward him with his hand outstretched.

Eleanor smiled as she watched the pair together. They shook hands and embraced. The duke didn’t request the farmer to address him as “Your Grace” or with any formal title. It was as if there were no barriers between them at all.

“Come in, come in out of this snow. God’s blood, I have not seen you in so many years. Oh, who do we have here?” The man’s happy face turned in Eleanor’s direction. “Forgive me, can’t see past the end of my own nose these days.”

“This is Lady Eleanor, a friend,” the duke said deeply.

A friend.

Eleanor looked toward him and smiled, uncertain whether to be warmed by the description or a little disappointed.

Was I hoping he'd describe me as something more? What else could he possibly call me?

“My lady.” Trevor bowed to her. “Come in, come in. God, I cannot believe it is you, Nathaniel. What years have passed, eh?”

The next few minutes flew by in a whirl. They were hurried into the front room where Trevor’s wife, Miriam, made them cups of tea. They had a baby, and the duke happily took the boy in his arms and tickled him under the arms until he giggled with delight. Eleanor watched on, enjoying the happy reunion between the pair.

“Here, hold him for me, would you?” Miriam asked, taking the boy and passing him to Eleanor. “I’ll get us some more hot water for the tea.”

Eleanor adjusted the baby in her grasp and laid him down as he yawned, so he could sleep. One of his small hands closed around her thumb as his eyes closed.

She had a strange longing to know what it could be like to have a child of her own, but she clamped down on that sensation as fast as she could.

“I am so sorry for what has happened to you.” Trevor clapped the duke’s shoulder. “Though to look at you, you’re not doing badly.” He gestured to the clothes the duke wore.

“I’m not doing badly at all. Don’t worry about me.” The duke waved off the concern.

Eleanor looked up, holding the baby safely in her arms as she watched him. Despite the evident turmoil he’d been in up at the house, he was brushing it off, making the focus his friend rather than himself.

“I wish to hear all about you, how the tenants have been, everyone,” he said with eagerness. “Do not leave anything out.”

“Nothing, eh? Well, as you wish. Though you may get tired of hearing my voice by the end of it.” Trevor went into a great description of when David took over the land after his father’s passing. They had a few bad winters and the harvests were so poor, they made no money and had little to eat. “People starved that year.”

“They starved?” The duke looked in danger of keeling over in his seat. Eleanor held her breath, staring at him. He was in physical pain.

“It didn’t happen again.” Trevor shook his head. “My father, you remember him?”

“I’ll never forget him,” the duke said with a nod. “Always singing old sea shanties for some reason, even though he worked on dry land.”

“That was him.” Trevor smiled. “When he fell ill, your brother came to the house himself to check on him.”

“He did?” The duke stiffened.

“Everything changed after that. A doctor came to visit all the tenants regularly, and land management changed. We have a reservoir of water now; did you know that?”

“No. I didn’t. David never said in his letters. I do remember him saying something about how he had made changes, and he wanted to show them to me. I didn’t realize what he meant.”

“Well, things changed for the better.” Trevor smiled over his cup of tea. “I’d say he started to listen to what you had preached all those years ago, my friend. What was once dire became good indeed.”

The duke said nothing but stared forward into the fire in the corner of the room.

“If that’s the case, why do you have so little coal, Trevor?” the duke asked, pointing toward the scuttle.

Trevor sighed and sat back in his seat, letting his teacup rest precariously on his knee.

“I said your brother was a good man, my friend.” His voice had grown deeper. “Since that new man has taken over, he’s been pillaging the land. We’ve lost two tenant families in a month as he has sold off the houses.”

“He has?” The duke stood and moved toward the coal scuttle, evidently counting out what was in there.

Eleanor chewed her lip as she looked at the scuttle and then the baby in her arms. With so little coal and with the weather so cold outside, this baby may struggle to keep warm. She wrapped him in his swaddling, as tightly and as safely as she could.

“Here, take this, Trevor.” The duke reached into his pocket and pulled out such wads of banknotes that Trevor was instantly on his feet.

“I’m not taking your money!”

“Why not?” the duke asked. “You need it. Look at this.” He pointed at the scuttle again. “My family has done enough wrongs to yours.”

“Yet it’s not your family doing it now, is it?” Trevor reminded him, more calmly this time. “I cannot take your money.”

“Fine, then I have another idea.” The duke looked at the baby boy in Eleanor’s arms and placed the bank notes on the hearth over the fireplace. “This is for your son, a Christmas present. Use it for whatever you need it for, to keep him happy, to keep him... warm,” he added, looking at the scuttle.

Trevor smiled and stepped toward the duke, clapping him on the shoulder. “Merry Christmas, my friend. It’s a good present indeed to see you again.”

“Try again,” Eleanor urged. Bea screwed up her face as she slumped in the chair beside her sister, trying to repeat the list of countries’ names.

Nathaniel watched from his place across the library. He’d just had another meeting with the Earl of Wessex and had found out in detail just how bad Lord Wessex’s debts were. The poor man had run the family quite into the ground, and the more Nathaniel knew him, the more he understood how easily it had happened.

Lord Wessex had locked himself away for so long, not wanting to confront the real world, that others had taken advantage of his finances. The sort of corrupt businessmen that Nathaniel detested had swarmed around him, telling him of good investments that turned out to be frauds. This time, Nathaniel was determined that Lord Wessex would not lose out.

He’d just left the earl in the study with a list of reliable investment opportunities and had come to do some more reading on inheritance law when he found Eleanor giving her sister a lesson.

“Can’t we do something else?” Bea asked, giving up.

“Well, we could return to mathematics.” Eleanor pulled forward a heavy volume and dropped it on the table between them. Bea groaned so loudly that Nathaniel laughed from across the room. She tapped her head on the table, clearly preferring that feeling to the idea of doing mathematics. “I know you do not like it, but your education is important, Bea. Please, just do a little

more for me today.”

“Fine, as you wish.” Bea sat up with a new red mark on her forehead from where she had tapped it against the table. “But can I get something to drink first? It’s cold in here.”

“It is rather cold.” Eleanor agreed and looked at the fireplace, where the fire was running rather low. “We should save the coal for Christmas Day, though. It’s not far away now.”

“You have more coal downstairs,” Nathaniel assured her.

She jerked her head around so fast she clearly cricked her neck, and she raised a hand to rub a sore spot at the base of her throat.

“Have you been making more gifts?” she asked.

“Do not reprimand me for giving your family more Christmas presents,” he said with a mischievous smile. “It is what Christmas is all about, is it not?”

She smiled a little more then stood and moved to the fire, shoveling coal from the scuttle into the hearth. Bea took the opportunity to run and slipped out of

the room.

“Bea!” Eleanor called after her. “Do not think I missed you running away.”

“I’m coming back. I’m thirsty,” she complained, her voice disappearing into the recesses of the house.

Eleanor returned to her seat, looking rather dejected as she scanned the materials on the table before her. Nathaniel was filled with such curiosity that he couldn’t possibly concentrate on the book in his hands now. He closed it and crossed the room, stopping on the other side of the table to look down at the books.

“Her education matters to you, does it not?”

“Of course it does.” Eleanor nodded firmly. “An education is invaluable, to be able to navigate the world with wisdom. As we cannot afford a governess...” She paused, hanging her head a little. “I would feel awful if I did not try to give her the education she deserves. Even if my ability to make her concentrate is somewhat lacking.”

“One can see the love you have for her.” He sat down in the chair Bea had just vacated and looked through the papers, seeing at once that Eleanor’s curriculum was varied and detailed. There was mathematics and the sciences

here, with particular attention paid to the stars and the discoveries of Galileo. There were also books on art and literature. “You are quite devoted.”

“I am. I love her very dearly.” Eleanor smiled softly as she dragged forward another book. “Do you think this would interest her?” She opened up a book that was the history of the Roman Empire and Nathaniel wrinkled his nose. “No, I thought not.” She dropped the book back down again.

“What happens when you marry Mr. Briarhurst?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“What happens to Bea’s education then? Will she come to your house for lessons?”

His question seemed to have hit a sore spot. Eleanor’s shoulders shrugged forward and she repeatedly tapped a book in front of her, refusing to look at him.

“Eleanor?” he asked, once more not bothering with formality between them. It often happened between them now, and to his relief, she never pulled him up on it, never insisted he use her title, neither did she ask why he did it. “What will happen to Bea?”

“I do not know,” she confessed eventually. “Bea is the most important person in the world to me. It is one of the reasons I even agreed to court Mr. Briarhurst in the first place.”

“What do you mean?” Nathaniel folded his arms, staring at her in wonder.

“You know the way the world works, Your Grace.” She rolled her eyes. “If one sister is married well, then it makes the other instantly more eligible. When she grows up, all opportunities and possibilities will be open to her. She’ll have a chance to marry for love.” Her hands stopped fidgeting on the book and she swallowed audibly, as if realizing she had spoken too much.

“Do you dream of marrying for love, my lady?” he whispered, his tone rather playful.

“This has become personal.” She lifted her chin, looking him in the eye.

“I see nothing wrong with the dream. Is it not what everyone wants?”

Slowly, she nodded her head, then looked down at the books again. She cleared her throat and spoke louder, returning to their other subject as if neither of them had mentioned the idea of love at all.

“I will ask Mr. Briarhurst to allow Bea to come to the house, so I can continue her lessons. I fear what his answer will be, but I shall ask it nevertheless.”

“Has he ever spoken to her?”

“Not particularly.” She sighed loudly. “I think he rather looks at children as something to be ignored, Bea included. Please, do not tell Bea that. She already thinks he does not like her, and she does not need me confirming it.”

“I wouldn’t tell her that. I see no reason to upset her in such a way.”

Nathaniel leaned forward abruptly. He couldn’t bear the thought of Eleanor marrying Mr. Briarhurst. The more he knew her, the more insane an idea it seemed to be. Why would a woman with such a good heart, someone who was prepared to marry for the sake of her family, be bound to a man like Mr. Briarhurst?

“You should be marrying someone who would welcome Bea as part of his own family.”

“If only.”

“Such a thing is possible.”

“Not in my life.” She firmly shook her head. “Let this matter go, Your Grace. You must.”

He held up his hands in innocence, showing it was none of his business. There was tension between them in the air and they stared at one another.

“What happens to Bea then?”

“I’m trying not to think about that,” she murmured, her voice dropping lower as they could both hear footsteps nearby. “I don’t want my heart to break anymore at the thought of this marriage, Your Grace.”

“Wait... your heart is breaking?” He veered forward again. Her eyes widened as if she couldn’t believe she had spoken such words, but nothing more could be said as Bea returned carrying a vast silver tray.

“Oomph, this is heavy!” she cried.

“Let me help you with that.” Nathaniel moved to his feet and rounded the table, reaching for the tray and taking it out of her grasp. He laid it down on the table over some of the books, to the dismay of Eleanor who tried to recover as many as she could.

“What is this?” Nathaniel asked, catching the rich whiff of something that smelled like apples coming from the steaming jug in the center of the tray. Around the tray were three cups.

“Mulled cider,” Bea said with delight. “You said I could try some this year, didn’t you, Eleanor?”

“As long as you do not have too much.” Eleanor waved a quill at Bea in warning. “You may have one small glass and no more. If you do, will you concentrate on your lessons?”

“Maybe.”

Bea’s answer made the two of them laugh. Nathaniel reached for the jug and poured out the cider, letting the scents of the star anise and cinnamon hit the air, making the room smell like Christmas. He poured out three cups and was careful to give Bea only a small amount. She hung her nose over the rim of the cup in disappointment but drank anyway.

“That is delicious!” she cried and tipped the cup back again.

“She will not concentrate at all now, will she?” Eleanor asked, addressing Nathaniel alone.

“You might have to abandon your lessons today.”

“No, no. I will pay attention.” Bea bounced on her toes. “If I can request the lesson.”

“You have an idea for a lesson?” Eleanor sat tall, her smile growing. “Well, this is good news. Go on, what would you like to learn?”

“I would like to learn to dance. Properly,” she added hurriedly. “I wish to know the dances that you do at all these balls and parties. Would you teach me? Please?” Bea raced around the table and pulled on Eleanor’s arm. “It is nearly Christmas. I could dance at parties then.”

“You know our father will not take you to a party,” Eleanor said with a laugh.

“Please, please!” Bea said exaggeratedly, bouncing on her toes another time.

“I would love to teach you, Bea, but I am afraid in order to do so I need to know the male part, and I do not. We might have to wait until Father is finished with work.”

Nathaniel took a sip of his mulled cider. He wasn't sure if it was the happy air created by the Christmas drink, or perhaps the company of Eleanor and Bea, but he had an idea for Bea to get what she wanted.

“I could take the place of the lead,” he said simply.

Eleanor and Bea both looked sharply at him.

Chapter 13

“You would?” Eleanor stared at the duke, clutching to her mulled cider with both hands.

“Of course.” He shrugged, as if it was mad to think he would not have offered to help. “So, what dances do you know, Bea?”

“I know a volta.” Bea put down her cup and started to hop around the room in an approximation of the dance.

“Not bad at all.”

“Eleanor tells me they don’t do voltas anymore.” Bea looked quite outraged at the idea, stopping dancing and folding her arms. “Why not?”

“Fashions change.” Eleanor lifted her cup to her lips another time. “I think some decided the closeness of a volta was rather too... intimate for a dance floor.”

“More intimate than a waltz?” The duke’s playful question had her looking at him, trying to hold back her smile.

“You and I danced a waltz.”

“Exactly.”

Was that flirtation?

Eleanor was certain her face was flushing red as she stared at him, remembering that waltz. He had been so gentle, his hand caressing the curve of her waist as he’d led her around the floor. It was a far cry from any dance she’d ever had with Mr. Briarhurst.

He was a little too flamboyant and eager in his dancing for her liking. She often left the floor feeling embarrassed, but when dancing with the duke, she’d felt safe, as if they danced alone with no other around them.

“You danced a waltz?” Bea giggled, looking between the two of them.

“I had to practically beg Mr. Briarhurst to let go of her,” the duke said in what he mockingly pretended to be a conspiratorial whisper, though he made

no real effort to lower his voice, intending for Eleanor to hear everything.

“You did not,” she insisted. When the duke looked at her with raised eyebrows, she reached for the mulled cider and topped up her glass. “Well, maybe you had to basically trick him into allowing me to leave his side.”

“Allowing you?” Bea repeated, though it seemed the duke was tempted to show the same outrage. “Since when are you his property?”

Eleanor said nothing and sipped the cider. She didn’t want to think of Mr. Briarhurst at that moment. She wanted to think of the Duke of Windhaven and his dancing.

“Well, how about a cotillion?” the duke asked, rubbing his hands together. “What do you say, Eleanor?”

She nodded happily but remained sitting. If she had to dance with the duke again, she was not sure her beating heart would be able to handle it.

“Right, Bea. Come and stand opposite me here.” The duke acted fast. He swept another table and a set of chairs out of the way, then rolled up a rug. Meanwhile, Bea stole another sip of cider and danced merrily on the spot, waiting. “Now, we begin.” The duke stood opposite her and showed her the first opening steps of a famous cotillion, *La Belle*.

In her excitement, Bea kept fumbling the steps and occasionally tripped on her own feet. To Eleanor's delight, the duke never lost patience with her and just started each bit of the lesson again, slowly teaching her the various steps.

Eleanor gazed on happily, watching the pair with her mulled cider before her and creating more paper decorations from Christmas out of the discarded notes from one of Bea's forgotten lessons. As she watched, Eleanor couldn't fight the temptation of her gaze to linger on the duke for far longer than it should have done.

Not only did she admire him as he danced, the liveness of his figure and how he still managed to dance with a masculine energy, but she also thought of the patience and kindness he had. He frequently made jokes with Bea, encouraging her to smile. He was as good as a brother to her.

Like a brother...

A wild idea took up its place in Eleanor's mind and she struggled to fight it. She pictured herself at a Christmas wedding, where the bouquets at the ends of the pews were full of red flowers and strong evergreen boughs. She saw herself carrying one such bouquet down the aisle, on the arm of her father, toward someone who waited for her by the altar.

When he turned to smile at her, it was not Mr. Briarhurst's face, but the Duke of Windhaven. Those sharp and angular lines softened, and that scar was very noticeable indeed, curling around his eye. He looked truly happy, and Eleanor couldn't help smiling back.

This is a mad idea. Mad!

Yet she couldn't stop picturing it. She saw her father passing her hand into the duke's grasp. The duke lifted her hand and turned it over so he could kiss the back. The moment his lips touched her skin, Eleanor felt as light as a feather, quite intoxicated, as if she had drunk three glasses full of cider.

"Eleanor? What do you think?"

"Hmm?" Eleanor looked sharply at her sister, the image falling away from her mind.

I shouldn't be thinking such things. She was courting Mr. Briarhurst, the very man who had the duke's fortune. How inappropriate was it to start fantasizing about the duke?

"What was that?" Eleanor asked, trying to cover up for the fact she hadn't been paying attention.

“I think she’s drunk too much cider,” Bea said, turning to the duke.

“Or she’s just distracted.” The duke shrugged off his tailcoat, which wasn’t helping Eleanor’s ability to concentrate. She looked at his athletic figure and the way he rolled his shirt sleeves up to his elbows.

“I was just saying, Eleanor, that I can’t picture what this looks like. Could you demonstrate?”

“Me?” Eleanor asked, holding a hand to her chest.

“Who else is there in the room to demonstrate?”

“I’m not good at the lady part,” the duke added with a mischievous smile across the room. “So, we must look to you, my lady.”

Eleanor lowered the glass back to the desk. Sometimes, the duke would slip and address her by her name. She much preferred those moments, when it was as if there was no formality between them at all.

“Very well.” She stood and moved toward the space. “What did you wish me to show you?” She expected to demonstrate some footwork or something for Bea.

“This part.” Bea linked arms with the duke and twirled around him, but nearly managed to drag him off his feet with the rushed movement.

“She is fond of dancing fast,” the duke said with a comically strained voice.

“So, demonstrate with the duke.” Bea stood back and waved a hand between the pair of them. “Please?”

“Ah.” Eleanor clamped down on the thudding of her heart that had started in her chest. She could practically feel it thumping against her ribcage just at the thought of dancing with the duke again and being in his arms.

“You’ve danced with me once already,” the duke said, taking his place, that smile still in place. “I’m not so scary, am I?”

“Scary? Never.” She took Bea’s place and Bea hurried off, back toward the table. “No more cider, Bea. I see you.”

Bea put down the jug again with a heavy huff and turned to watch them dance.

The duke bowed, showing he was starting from the beginning of the dance. Eleanor curtsied, maintaining the connection of their gazes. When they stood straight, the duke began, leading her into the first figures.

They walked around one another. Eleanor could practically feel her hand raising through the air, with the temptation to instigate some sort of touch between them. They moved to walk around an imaginary couple beside them, then returned to facing one another.

The duke stepped forward and linked their arms. Eleanor performed the move that Bea struggled so much with, turning under his arm until she was nestled into his side. They shifted their hands to a pattern that formed an eight shape, then he led her down the room with a slow *pas de bourrée* step.

When they reached the other end of the room, he turned her back under his arm and released her. They walked around the other imaginary couple again, then came back together, this time circling one another with hands clasped together.

The whole time, Eleanor looked the duke in the eye. She couldn't believe how close they danced at times. Though it was the choreography of the dance, it somehow felt more risqué than it had ever done before.

Each touch was either as light as a feather between them, as if they knew they should not be doing it, or surprising in its firmness, such as when she turned under his arm for another time and tripped on the edge of the rolled-up rug. He managed to catch her firmly and nestle her into his side, directing her across the room. The surety of that touch made her feel even safer than before.

They danced the whole dance, without interruption, and with neither one of them saying anything. When they completed the closing figures, they moved to stand in front of one another. She could hear his breathing had quickened, just as her own had done. He bowed and she curtsied, though they didn't release one another, and still held hands.

“Oh, my.” Bea sighed with exaggeration when they finished.

Eleanor still didn't look away from the duke as they both stood straight again. He wasn't smiling but looking at her with such intensity, she was breathless.

“Shall I leave the room?” Bea's question made the duke burst out laughing.

“Bea!” Eleanor snatched her hand out of the duke's and rounded on her sister with her hands on her hips.

“What?” Bea asked innocently, raising her hands in the air. “it seemed like quite an intimate dance to me.”

“That is simply the effect of the dance, is it not, Your Grace?” Eleanor appealed to the duke with some desperation.

Say something. Anything!

“Yes, of course.” Though the duke seemed equally uncertain of his words. “Though perhaps you do not have to stare at me quite as much when we dance, Bea.”

“Oh,” Eleanor said sharply to the duke. He laughed, and winked at her, showing he was only playing.

Glad to put some distance between them again, Eleanor took her sister’s shoulders and steered Bea back into the clearing.

“Now, it’s your turn.” Eleanor eagerly returned to her seat and had no inclination to stand and demonstrate again, despite the temptation. As Bea’s dancing skill improved, Eleanor barely watched her sister at all anymore. Quite entranced as she watched the duke instead, she thought of their dance. Despite his tease about her staring at him, she was certain he had not looked

away.

Is it so mad to think he has looked at me the way that I have looked at him?

In the end, she was quite glad when the butler came and told them dinner was ready. She needed the break from staring at the duke and being tormented by her own thoughts.

Eleanor had barely slept. In the end, she gave up trying to sleep entirely and climbed out of the bed, pulling a shawl around her shoulders. In the darkness, she looked longingly at the fire grate but decided against trying to light it.

She had recently asked just how much coal the duke had paid for to be added to their stores, and discovering how much it was, she was so touched by his kindness she was determined to preserve it. When he returned to America, he would have no need to send money anymore for coal, so she would not waste it now.

“Oh, this is hopeless.” Angered that her thoughts had turned back to him again, she huffed and hurried toward her writing bureau in the corner of the room, sitting down. It was so cold that she rethought her decision a minute later and collected a second shawl before returning to her seat and lighting a

candle from the tinder box.

The Duke of Windhaven was the very reason she could not sleep. Each time she closed her eyes, she saw herself dancing with him again until she felt like a giddy child, unable to control the beating of her heart.

“I am no child,” she said aloud, as if it would somehow help to control her thoughts. Deciding what she needed was some sort of activity to occupy her mind, she pulled out a sheet of paper from her bureau, along with a bottle of ink and a quill, and began to write some notes on planning food for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

As the duke was still to be with them, she wanted to choose food that would impress while being mindful of the fact the budget was not particularly large.

Does he like pheasant? Or goose, I wonder? He seemed keen on that cranberry sauce the other night...

“I can plan a meal without thinking of him,” she said aloud, drawing firm lines through the first few things she had written down and attempting to start again.

There were hurried footsteps in the corridor. The sound was so unexpected that Eleanor lifted her head, straining to listen. A few seconds later, there was

a hurried knock at her chamber door.

“Eleanor? Are you awake?”

“Bea?” Eleanor dropped the quill, making a mess of her notes with splattered ink, and hurried to the door. She flung it open to find Bea stood on the other side in nothing but her night shift, trembling in the cold. “Goodness, what is wrong?”

She rushed Bea into the room and took off one of the shawls she was wearing, wrapping it around her sister’s shoulders.

“I had another nightmare.” Bea sniffed, clearly holding back tears. “Pa said they would have stopped by now, but they don’t stop. They keep coming.” She couldn’t hold back her tears anymore and her breath gasped.

“Oh, Bea. There now.” Eleanor embraced her sister tightly, allowing her to cry to get out the pain. Eventually, she moved Bea to sit on the edge of the bed and knelt before her. “It’s just a dream. They’re rather like clouds or mist—when you wake, you can waft it all away.”

Bea nodded through her tears and wiped her cheeks with the backs of her hands, clearly trying to believe it.

“What did you see this time?” Eleanor asked. Bea had had nightmares for the last few years on and off, but it was certain that recently the dreams had become fewer. Eleanor was holding onto the hope of her father that someday, Bea would grow out of having so many.

“It saw a woman,” Bea said slowly. “I think she was our mother.” At the words, Eleanor’s hands stilled over Bea’s in her lap. “I couldn’t catch her. I was chasing her through some woods, trying to get to her, shouting her name, but she kept on running away. I couldn’t get to her.” Her breath caught in her throat again.

“There now.” Eleanor leaned forward. “I can tell you for certain it wasn’t our mother. Our mother would have run straight to you and embraced you tightly. I never saw her hold onto anything so much as she did you that day you were born.” She felt a tightness in her own throat.

It was the day they had lost her mother. There were complications after Bea’s birth, and though Anne had held tightly to Bea, singing soft lullabies to her, reluctant to let go of her, she grew paler by the minute. It wasn’t long before the doctor had placed Bea in the waiting hands of their father and demanded everyone leave the room.

Eleanor could still remember following her father out of the chamber, one hand on the back of her father’s coat as Bea cried loudly. The last view she had of her mother was a sad sort of smile as Anne reached toward her from the bed. Then the door was closed, separating them for good.

“Our mother would have wrapped you up in her arms. So, whatever nightmare this was, trust me in this. It was not her. It was someone else,” Eleanor assured her sister.

“I know.” Bea nodded. “I got closer at one point in the dream. Then... then I saw it was you. *You* were the one running away from me.”

“Me?” Eleanor stood up, in outrage. “Could you imagine I’d ever run away from you? Nonsense.” She sat down on the bed beside Bea and wrapped her arms tightly around her. “You are the dearest thing in my life. So, this figure in your dream wasn’t our mother, and it wasn’t me. I’m right here, Bea.” She bent forward and rested her head on her sister’s. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Bea sniffed and leaned forward, her head on Eleanor’s shoulder. Eleanor embraced her sister tightly as she thought of the promise she had just made and the conversation she’d had with the Duke of Windhaven earlier.

If all went according to plan and she did marry Mr. Briarhurst after all, wasn’t she leaving Bea then?

No. I will not let it happen.

Eleanor made the vow in her own mind. No matter what happened in the future, whether she married Mr. Briarhurst or not, she would keep Bea in her life daily—even if she had to sneak Bea into her new home with Mr. Briarhurst. She and Bea would always be together.

Bea cried out her tears from the nightmare as Eleanor held her close.

What if Mr. Briarhurst forbade Bea from coming to the house?

Chapter 14

“There is not much you can do, Your Grace.” The lawyer leaned forward and rested his elbows on the desk between them.

Nathaniel breathed in sharply. This had to be the fourth lawyer he had met with this week, and to his dismay, they were all very much saying the same thing. No one wished to go up against such a settlement as the one bequeathed to Mr. Briarhurst.

“Is it because you believe the law is steadfast when it comes to the will?” Nathaniel asked, keeping his voice calm. “Or do you believe that Mr. Briarhurst is now in possession of such a vast fortune that you could not possibly go up against the caliber of lawyers he would hire?”

“Well, I never!” Flustered, the indignant lawyer sat back and breathed in so deeply that his rounded belly strained against his waistcoat and his double chin bulged over the top of his collar. “It is not a matter of a lack of courage. It is a matter of the law. These things cannot be challenged.”

“They can, I have read of them,” Nathaniel continued calmly. “It is possible to challenge a will if one believes the man in question was not of sound mind when he made the will.”

“Proving such a claim is madness, almost impossible to achieve, and I can tell you categorically that you would not win.” The lawyer stood, his stomach bulging over his desk. “You have been in America too long, Your Grace. You had not seen your brother and therefore cannot comment on the soundness of his mind. I wish you a good day, but this conversation is at an end.”

Nathaniel stood and didn't bother thanking the man for his time. From the moment he'd stepped into that office, he had known it was a bad decision. The lawyer showed no interest in seeing him or hearing what he had to say. He just wanted to get rid of him as soon as possible.

Nathaniel hurried down the staircase in the narrow townhouse building of Covent Garden and picked up his frock coat by the door, hurrying out of the door so fast that he didn't manage to pull it around his shoulders before he stepped outside. Fresh snow was falling, but lightly today, casting the whole square into a mist of whiteness.

Pulling the collar of his coat around his neck tightly, he buried his mouth into the lining, trying to stay warm as the bitter chill rose up. He walked on through the square, so angry at his meeting with the lawyer that he practically stomped through the snow.

It wasn't as if he was going to challenge the entire settlement. If it was David's wish at the end that Briarhurst should have the money, then Nathaniel had to respect it, but he still wished to claim something.

He'd been allowed to leave his family's home with a few paintings and a box full of things from his childhood, but he wasn't permitted access to his father's wine collection, any of the old books in the library, even when he knew Briarhurst was no great reader, and most especially, he was forbidden from seeing his mother's jewels.

What could Briarhurst possibly want with them?

Some were passed down through the family for generations. They were personal items and should have belonged to the family.

"What do you think?" a voice cried that Nathaniel knew so well, he halted at once. "Come on, Eleanor. You must think something about it."

"I think you are being very generous in wishing to give the duke a gift. It is a great kindness indeed," Eleanor's soft voice called through the snow. Nathaniel turned, no longer intently walking toward his carriage but searching for those voices instead. "I just think that the duke may like something a little better than a dress sword, Bea."

"We could truly play pirates then," Bea complained.

The two appeared before him in the mist, with Bea planting her nose to the window of a vast old shop, dressed in uniforms and dress swords. Eleanor stood beside her, pulling at the fraying gloves on her wrists.

“Then it is a gift for you and not for him. Come, we must be able to find something that is more suited to him. Something he’d truly wish for.” Eleanor took Bea’s shoulder and attempted to steer her away, but Bea refused to be moved from the window.

Nathaniel felt a sudden smile tug up his cheeks. All the anger from the lawyer’s office left him as he stared at Eleanor and Bea. It was the kindness that had made him so happy—when the family was short on money, not only had they opened their doors to allow him to stay, but they were now also thinking of giving him a present for Christmas.

“Have you found anything yet?” another voice said, approaching the two of them. It was Lord Wessex, struggling in the cold with his collar turned up around his mouth. “God’s death, we shall catch fevers in this chill. Come, Bea. Perhaps we could find a hot chocolate?”

“I wish to get the duke a dress sword for Christmas, but Eleanor says it is not a good idea.” Bea pouted, looking at her father.

“Ah, yes, well... perhaps we could find something a little more suited.” Lord Wessex spoke kindly, clearly trying to soften the blow for his youngest

daughter.

Nathaniel approached them slowly. Fortunately, there was so much chatter in Covent Garden and the wind was whistling so much that they did not notice his boots crunching the snow behind him.

“I like that one.” Bea pointed at the finest dress sword, and perhaps the most expensive of the lot, gilded with gold and with a crimson tassel hanging from the handle.

“Far too formal. How can one play pirates with that, Bea?” Nathaniel asked.

“Oh! My heart!” Eleanor cried and flung herself around in surprise.

Nathaniel reached out quickly. To stop Eleanor from falling face-first in the snow, he caught her around the waist and steadied her quickly. The two of them ended up swaying together for a few seconds, their boots slipping. Eleanor blushed crimson red despite the cold in the air, her hands momentarily resting on his arms before she retreated.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice soft, just as Nathaniel reached her. “What are you doing here? You scared me half to death.”

“I noticed,” Nathaniel said with a smile and winked at Bea, who was now doing her best to hide her laughter behind a cupped hand, though she was doing a mightily poor job of it. “I have been to see the lawyers.”

“How did things fare?” Lord Wessex asked at once, his usual concern in place.

“It is what it is.” Nathaniel had no wish to go into any greater detail. The family seemed to understand so at once, for conversation returned to the matter of his gift.

“Do you really not wish for a sword?” Bea said again, pouting once more as she looked at the shop window.

“Well, one cannot play pirates with it very easily, can they?” Nathaniel shrugged. “I need no gift, Bea. You have all been very generous as it is, opening your doors to me.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Eleanor looking at him. Her blush was still in place, but her smile had now grown. He thought he might have impressed her with what he had said, and the thought that he could impress Eleanor at all was truly a thrill indeed.

“We must get you something,” Bea insisted, stomping one foot in the snow beneath her in indignation. “We must, Pa.”

“And we will.” Lord Wessex laughed and placed a hand on his daughter’s shoulder. “Don’t you worry about that. In fact, I think Eleanor has a rather good idea for a gift for him, so why don’t we put our faith in her.”

“You do?” Nathaniel looked at her curiously. Once more, she blushed, but this time she looked away, not quite meeting his gaze.

“You shall have to wait until Christmas to see.”

Nathaniel smiled. There was something warming indeed about the idea that in all his time in the house, he and Eleanor knew each other so well now that she knew just what to get him for Christmas.

“Now, the cold is really getting to us all. I’m shivering, and the poor duke here is barely in his coat.”

Nathaniel looked down, feeling perfectly settled in his coat even if he had let it hang open. He rather suspected Lord Wessex was eager to urge his family out of the snow.

“Come, let us find somewhere for a hot chocolate. Your Grace? Would you accompany us?”

“Of course.” Nathaniel happily intended to follow.

Bea took her father’s hand and was led through snowy Covent Garden, toward a tea house at the back of the square. Eleanor followed next, with Nathaniel a step behind, though she quickly grew distracted. Her pace slowed as her head turned to a window, looking inside at a glover’s shop.

Each part of the window display was covered in rich suedes and leather, with the occasional fur-lined glove. They were beautiful, their colors somewhat muted by the mist that hung around them. Nathaniel stopped at Eleanor’s side, trying to see what she was looking at.

“Something you like?” he whispered, halting at her side.

“Just a wild idea of mine.” She smiled and nodded at a pair of cream suede gloves. They were beautiful and elegant, with a single button on the cuff of the gloves and embroidered across the back with tulip flowers. “The gloves I own are perfectly fine for now. I do not need them. Father is right, we should get out of this weather.” She smiled and hurried off again.

Nathaniel didn't follow for a moment. He glanced back through the window and committed the gloves to memory. Already he had told himself there would be no harm in getting Eleanor another gift, and the winter gloves she wore were fraying and in desperate need of being replaced.

One more gift, Eleanor. Just one more for Christmas.

He remembered every detail about the gloves before he followed the others, catching them up through the mist and snow. When they reached the teahouse door, he stepped in behind Eleanor. She stood a foot from her father, her head angled around.

"I thought we had lost you for a moment."

"I'm here," he assured her with a smile, warmed when she returned that expression.

"Ah, and your daughter and her husband are joining you, my lord?" the owner of the teashop asked Lord Wessex, looking straight at Eleanor and Nathaniel together.

"I beg your pardon?" Lord Wessex asked.

As Nathaniel and Eleanor exchanged a look, realizing the error, Nathaniel made no move to step back from her, and neither did she increase the distance between them either. When Lord Wessex realized the mistake too, he gave a bark of laughter.

“You are not the first to mistake them for husband and wife. The Duke of Windhaven is a family friend, but yes, please, they will be joining me and my youngest daughter.”

As they were led toward the table, Eleanor lowered her voice, walking alongside Nathaniel.

“Were you aware others had mistaken us for being husband and wife, too?”

“No. It’s the first I have heard of it.”

When he reached the table, Nathaniel considered sitting on Bea’s other side, not wanting the mistake to happen again, but then he relented. He wished to sit next to Eleanor, so why should he not? He sat down beside her, rather glad when she smiled at his choice of seat.

“I want to come.”

“When you’re older, Bea, you can come. I promise,” Eleanor assured her sister as she fussed with the loose curls of her hair again, ensuring enough was still swept up off her neck.

“It’s not fair.” Bea had been rather impatient and frustrated ever since they had returned from their shopping in Covent Garden. By now, she would usually be dancing around the entrance hall, longing to dance herself at the ball tonight. Yet she was out of spirits and settled herself by sitting on the bottom step with her chin in her hands. “I wish to go.”

“You will do, someday, I promise.” Eleanor stepped away from the mirror and moved toward her sister, sinking down to her knees in front of her. “What is wrong, Bea? By now, you are usually dancing around the room. I have a challenge in holding you back from getting in the carriage with me. It is cold out there. Is that what holds you back?”

“It is cold.” She wrinkled her nose, clearly not quite liking the idea. “I’m just frustrated. We didn’t get a gift for the duke.”

“Trust me.” Eleanor lowered her voice and winked. “I have the perfect idea for a gift for him. I shall secure it and ensure all of our names are on the label.

You have my word.”

Bea’s expression softened a little as she sat straight, but she still didn’t start dancing around the room.

Steps on the staircase high above drew their attention, and Eleanor stood as the Duke of Windhaven appeared. He was dressed well for the ball tonight in a dark blue suit, his waistcoat embroidered in silver, rather like the frost beyond the windows. He fussed with his cravat as he walked down the stairs, looking quite uncomfortable.

“Why do we wear these ridiculous things?” he asked in frustration, climbing down to stand beside Bea on the bottom step. “On a scale of one to ten, Bea, how mad do I look in this overly frilly cravat?”

“A hundred,” she said, her nose still wrinkled.

“I was afraid you’d say that.” He pulled again and managed to make the cravat worse than before. “What a mess.”

“You’ve simply tied it wrong.” Eleanor chuckled. “There’s a way to tie so it is not so...”

“Frivolous?” he offered, clearly having no liking for it.

“Yes, you could say that. Come here, I’ll show you.” She stopped in front of him and reached up for the cravat, taking it from his hands and tying it for him. So often had she done this for her father over the years, as he no longer employed a valet in a bid to save money, that tying it felt second nature to her.

She fastened it in such a way that the frilliest parts were tucked away from view beneath the waistcoat. Much neater than before, it rested perfectly around his throat. “There. You are ready for the ball now, Your Grace.”

She looked up from her work to find he was staring at her, rather intently. There was something about it she couldn’t quite put her finger on, but once more, as she had done all day, she found herself smiling ridiculously at him for no good reason.

“Ahem.” Bea cleared her throat.

Eleanor stepped back from the duke, her hands falling to her sides as her sister looked between them.

“Just making sure you both remember I am here.”

“What’s all this?” Richard appeared at the top of the stairs. “Who could forget you, Bea?”

“No one,” Eleanor answered simply, offering Bea a warning glare not to talk of the way she had tied the cravat. Richard walked down the stairs, fussing with his own jacket and the cuffs of his lacy shirt, which he plainly had no liking for either.

“Well, I must admit, the hopes I had for this evening are not to be met.”

“What do you mean, Father?” Eleanor asked.

“This arrived just an hour ago. It is from that suitor of yours.” He reached a hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small letter that he passed to her to read. “So much for a betrothal tonight, eh?”

“Did you think you would have one?” the duke asked, his voice rather tight. “Did Mr. Briarhurst imply he would propose tonight?”

“No.” Richard sighed deeply. “But I live in hope. I must see my daughter settled, Your Grace. I must see her comfortable and happy.”

“I am happy where I am,” Eleanor pointed out, but this didn’t seem to make a difference. Richard went to discuss the arrangements for the carriage with the butler as Eleanor opened the letter and looked inside.

My Lord Wessex,

It is with my sincerest apologies that I will not have the pleasure of your company and your daughter’s tonight at the Fitzroy Winter Ball. I am afraid I am suffering from a head cold and have been advised to stay at home, for this awful weather we are suffering could make it worse.

I wish you the best evening and hope to see you both soon. You must come to my house soon where we can share dinner.

I shall write soon.

Yours et cetera,

Mr. Henry Briarhurst.

Eleanor stared at the letter, feeling more and more put out by what was written there. She wasn't upset because Mr. Briarhurst was no longer coming. On the contrary, she was actually relieved by such an idea, but something else was bothering her.

"Curious," the duke said from his place at her shoulder. She jumped, realizing he had hovered there to read the letter, too. "I would have thought a good suitor would have written to his love, not his love's father." With these words, he turned away to help the earl.

Eleanor lowered the letter and looked at Bea who still sat on the bottom step with her chin in her hands.

"He has a point, you know," Bea said, shaking her head.

"I know."

Chapter 15

“Eleanor, you have not stopped smiling all night.”

“I am not so bad.” Eleanor attempted to flatten her lips together.

Sophie raised her eyebrows in response, and a second later, Eleanor’s attempt to be impassive failed her and she smiled once again.

“See?” Sophie flicked her fingers and pointed at Eleanor’s face. “I have never seen you this jolly. As tempted as I am to say it is because of Mr. Briarhurst’s absence tonight, I have a feeling it has more to do with the man who keeps asking you for dances.”

“Shh.” Eleanor waved her fan in the air, trying to urge Sophie to lower her voice. “Do you wish everyone in this ballroom to hear what is making me smile?”

“I should think everyone knows.” Sophie shrugged. “You see, my friend, it is very difficult for one to hide what they feel when they wear their expressions so easily on their face.” She leaned against the wall behind her, looking quite triumphant as she used her own fan to gesture to Eleanor’s face once more.

“You might as well declare you are in love now.”

“I beg your pardon?” Eleanor nearly dropped the glass of lemonade in her hands. “I am not... I mean, what did you say? With whom do you think I’m...?”

“Do not insult my intelligence, Eleanor.” Sophie giggled once more. “You should see the pair of you together. You hang on his every word, and his rather sharp and austere manner actually softens when he is around you.”

“There is nothing austere about him. I might have made that mistake once, believing it myself, but believe me now. There is nothing austere at all in his manner.” She shook her head rather emphatically, realizing she must have made a mistake as Sophie was now smiling even more than before.

“You know who we are talking of then? Whom I believe you to be in love with? Even though I have not said his name.”

“Oh, you’re just out to cause trouble.” Eleanor looked away, her eyes darting across the ballroom. She pretended to be interested in watching the dancers, anything to avoid looking back at Sophie—though really, her eyes were searching for another.

The Fitzroy ball was quite magnificent. The servers were dressed grandly in

gold and red, with sprigs of holly and mistletoe hanging from various trays that were carried bearing glasses of punch.

The violinists raised on the balcony were all dressed in snowy white, matching the world beyond the windows. The dancers themselves seemed merry indeed, though it was impossible to tell if it was the dancing and the heat of the room or the punch that made their cheeks so ruddy.

Where is he?

She searched for him once more. She had already danced twice this evening with the Duke of Windhaven, to her delight, and with no other.

She had no inclination to dance with any other man there, and she was overjoyed with the fact that without Mr. Briarhurst at her arm, she didn't have to talk to his business contacts and make stiff and awkward conversation with men who had no interest in talking to her either. She spoke to her friends and family all night and spent the evening as she wished to.

“Who are you looking for?” Sophie said, curiosity tinging her voice.

“No one.” Eleanor adopted an innocent look, turning back to her friend whose eyes had now narrowed.

“Yes, of course, you are not looking for anyone. Just as Linora has been avoiding Lord Lupin all night.” She pointed with her fan across the room to where Linora was dancing with Lord Lupin, a French aristocrat who had arrived for the Christmas season. “You are both in danger of finding yourselves in love if you are not careful.”

“As I said, I am not in—oh, Your Grace.” Eleanor broke off, praying that the Duke of Windhaven had heard nothing of their conversation as he appeared at her side. “Is all well?”

“Very.” He smiled and held up his hand to her. “Your father is rather enjoying the company of some gentlemen at cards. Shall we take the opportunity for another dance?”

She took the hint. She knew he feared the same thing as her—as much as they enjoyed dancing together, if her father knew they danced so many times, he might have something to say about the matter. After all, so much dancing together could start rumors.

“We shall.” She threaded her fan over her wrist as Sophie took her glass of lemonade from her, and Eleanor placed her hand into his. The duke led her toward the dance floor.

The two previous dances they’d had that night were all upbeat quadrilles and

cotillions, happy tunes indeed. As the last song ended and the next began, Eleanor heard the opening three-time beats of a slow waltz.

The duke escorted her onto the floor and they took their places, bowing and curtsying as the others did. When they took hold of one another, Eleanor kept her touch as light as possible, though she was very aware of the excitement she felt, the stiffening in her stomach, as the duke took hold of her waist.

“Tell me something,” he whispered, as they danced together.

“Anything? I could be here thinking of a subject for a while.”

At her jest, he smiled softly. “Assure me that you have no intention to spend too much money on me, whatever this Christmas present of yours to me shall be.” His expression seemed rather serious.

“Your Grace.” She spoke slowly, wanting him to take her seriously. “You have been incredibly generous with your gifts. Far too generous! You must allow us to return in kind.”

“I am pleased with the gifts.” His eyes darted down her. “By the way, the gown looks quite beautiful.”

Eleanor tried not to let her smile grow greater, but it did regardless. The gown had been finished by the modiste the day before and sent around. The rich Pomona green material was startling in this sea of pastel-colored gowns, and she adored it. For a chance, it made her feel different from the crowd, rather than just one of many.

“Thank you for it,” Eleanor said in a rush. “I am very grateful indeed for this gown. I cannot remember loving a gift so much.”

“So, you can see why I wished to give it to you,” he said, his voice calm. “To see you smile in this manner is worth the cost.”

“Then I shall return such a kindness.” Eleanor lifted her chin higher, quite determined. “I have an idea for a gift for you, Your Grace, and considering your generosity to us all, I must give you something.”

“Yet there is a difference between us.”

He turned her away from another couple, where they were in danger of colliding, keeping her safe. They swayed from side to side together, in the middle of the floor. It was now such a crowded floor full of dancers that they had to move closer together. Eleanor didn't mind. In fact, it actually thrilled her.

“I have seen your father’s finances, Eleanor.”

She looked down, somewhere in the center of his chest, feeling rather wounded by the reminder of it.

“Please, do not be ashamed of it.” He shifted and practically whispered the words in her ear.

“I am helping your father where I can, and I’m pleased to say the initial investment he has made is already performing well. He should see a healthy return from it, but as with any business, actually getting the cash takes a while. He should see it in a couple of months, at the very least. I will not have your family making your finances worse just to give me a gift. That does not matter to me.”

“Your concern for us is touching.” Eleanor leaned back a little, the better to look him in the eye. “Let me make myself plain at once, Your Grace.”

“You still call me ‘Your Grace.’”

“It is your title!” she reminded him with a laugh.

“Perhaps. Yet it is not my name.” He grimaced at the idea. “I have this evening at last managed to persuade your father to call me by my Christian name. I would be honored if you would do the same. My name is Nathaniel. Please, use that instead.”

“I cannot.” She shook her head firmly.

“Why not?”

“We will already be making enough people whisper tonight by dancing together three times. What do you think they would say if they overheard me calling you by your Christian name, too?” she reminded him, and he chuckled, his voice deep.

“I hardly care for gossip. Something I have learned over the years is not to listen it.” He shrugged as they danced, showing how little he cared for the idea. “What matters is friendship, not gossip. Call me by my name, Eleanor. Please.”

She felt a growing warmth in her chest. Almost involuntarily, her hand squeezed his shoulder, holding tighter onto him, though he gave no sign of noticing. He just continued to smile at her.

“Well? Will you do as I ask?”

“You are asking me two things,” she said slowly. “You are asking me not to buy you a Christmas gift, and to call you Nathaniel. So, I shall give you one thing instead.”

He raised an eyebrow, clearly waiting for her answer.

“I shall call you by your name, Nathaniel.” Her voice lightened as she said his name. There was something rather thrilling about the intimacy of such a thing.

A voice in the back of her head darkened as she asked herself another question.

If friends can be so informal together, why has Mr. Briarhurst not asked me to call him Henry yet? We are supposed to be something more than friends!

“Yet I must get you a Christmas gift.”

“Ah, I should have made one request only.” He cursed at himself and swept

her around the room with greater vigor now. She laughed at the sudden movement, having to hold tighter onto him. Caught up in the excitement of the dance, they each concentrated on the movements alone for a minute, narrowly avoiding a collision with another couple, before settling themselves safely in the middle of the floor again.

“Do not put your family in trouble because of me, Eleanor,” he whispered as they grew slower in their movements. “All of your company for Christmas is the only gift I could ask for.”

“You inferred such a thing before,” she murmured, watching his expression carefully. “You suggested that as exciting as adventure can be, sometimes, it is lonely.”

His expression tightened. The skin around his scar stiffened, too.

“Sometimes, it is. I know you long for adventure, you long for escape, but I urge this.” He lowered his voice to something deeper. “If you ever get it, as I hope you do, take someone with you to share in it. You have no idea how much you wish to talk of all that you have experienced when evening comes, and you are settled in front of a fire with a drink and good food. Company, good company, it is as rare as diamonds.”

Her hand softened on his shoulder and moved down an inch, a slightly more intimate touch.

“If only a life of adventure was for me, I would take your advice wholeheartedly, but I fear it is not the life that awaits me.”

“I hope you are wrong in that regard.” He looked over her head, his expression stiff once more. “I pray you get what you are after someday.”

“What I am after...” The words were curious to her.

There were so many things she wanted in life, and the idea of adventure or exploration was just one of them. She wanted a good education for Bea, for her sister to be truly happy. She wanted her father’s finances to recover, for him not to be so frightened by their dwindling position. As she blinked, staring at Nathaniel, she realized he was now the one she was indebted to for the latter. For the first time in many years, she had hope regarding her father once again.

“I must thank you,” she whispered as their dance came to an end.

“What for?”

They both halted, releasing just one hand as they held onto the other, curtsying and bowing to each other.

“For what you are doing for my father,” she said in a rush as they moved back toward one another. He hooked her arm through his and led her away from the floor. “Not many men would go to such lengths, spend such hours looking at investments and finances in order to help him. You have been generous indeed with your time. So, thank you, Your Grace.”

He raised his eyebrows at her with a mischievous smile.

“Thank you, Nathaniel,” she corrected herself, watching as his smile grew greater.

“You need not thank me for that.” He shook his head. “I am just glad I could help him. Speaking of which, he is coming this way.”

Eleanor stiffened, her hand tightening rather far across Nathaniel’s elbow as she saw Richard marching through the crowd. She feared he would point out the growing intimacy between the pair of them, that dancing so much together simply wouldn’t do when she was courting another. Yet the closer he drew, the more she noticed he was wincing as he walked.

“Ah, there you two are.”

“Richard? Is something wrong?” Nathaniel asked, releasing Eleanor and taking her father’s arm.

With Nathaniel asking her father to use his Christian name, her father must have made the same offer too.

“I am afraid I have twisted my ankle.” Richard tried to put weight on his left foot and winced at once. “I was too busy winning my hand at cards, I did not notice what I was doing when I stood. I fear we must leave.”

“Of course. Let us go at once. I shall call for the carriage.” Eleanor hurried off to find the footman and arrange for it to be brought around at once.

At the door, she collected not only her pelisse, but her father’s and Nathaniel’s frock coats, too. Glancing across the room, she saw that the pair had been halted by their host, Mr. Samuel Fitzroy, who had stepped up to talk to Nathaniel. Whatever he said had been no good thing, for Nathaniel’s easy smile slipped from his face.

Nathaniel seemed to say very little in response, and it was her father who ended the conversation and insisted they had to leave. Nathaniel urged Richard to lean his weight upon him and, with care, he escorted Richard to the doorway where Eleanor stood.

Trapped between two thoughts, Eleanor didn't know which to say first. Should she express her gratitude for Nathaniel helping her father? Or her curiosity as to what the conversation with Mr. Fitzroy had been?

"Oh, let us go," Richard declared. "Before anyone else is so rude to you, Nathaniel."

"What happened?" Eleanor asked, leading the way out of the door and into the snow, rather glad her father had steered the conversation so she did not have to.

"Mr. Fitzroy was pointing out that my family had a tradition of holding a Christmas ball. He was asking why he hadn't yet received his own invitation. I had to point out that responsibility now lies with the man who owns the estate."

Nathaniel's reply was rather wooden. It was a far cry from how happy and soft he had been with her as they had danced.

"Unthinking man, that is the problem in this world. People do not think through their words before they speak," Richard hissed as they stepped up into the carriage.

The whole ride home, Richard bemoaned Mr. Fitzroy's thoughtless question as Eleanor tried to find out more about how her father had twisted his ankle. When they reached the house, he assured her he was quite well and climbed the stairs himself, though he struggled toward the top. He raised a hand, urging them not to worry, and walked down the corridor alone.

Eleanor and Nathaniel were left in the entrance hall together, with one candle in Eleanor's grasp to light the pair of them in a soft apricot-colored light.

"Thank you," she whispered, her voice quiet so the words did not travel through the house.

"For what?"

"For helping him." She nodded up at the landing. "You seem to have a habit of helping him as much as you can."

"He gave me somewhere to sleep when I had nowhere to go, when I was a man he did not know." Nathaniel's expression softened, and he was the version of himself she knew once more, the one she had danced with, the one she had come so close to. "His kindness is something I shall always endeavor to return."

"Well, thank you all the same. You do not know what it means to me."

He smiled, apparently lost for words at this moment.

Eleanor was all too aware of how alone they were in that entrance hall, how close they had been all night, and how little she wished to leave him. She wished to stay by his side, but such a longing was highly inappropriate indeed. Her eyes flitted down to his lips as a wild imagination entered her head—she wondered what it would be like to kiss Nathaniel.

When his eyes looked down too, she held her breath, curious if he was thinking the same thing about her.

Her father's chamber door must have shut high overhead, as the thud echoed down and they both jumped, looking away from one another.

“I should retire for the night. Goodnight, Nathaniel.”

“Goodnight, Eleanor.”

Then he caught her hand. It was the softest and gentlest of touches as he raised it to his lips and kissed the back. He didn't look at her, not once, but the effect of his lips on her bare hand made her heart thump hard in her chest.

He released her and turned away, heading toward the library.

What did that mean?

Chapter 16

“There. What do you think, Bea?” Eleanor asked as she held up the sprig of mistletoe around the metal candelabra. She knelt on the top of the library steps they had moved into the middle of the room and was careful to lay the leaves across the metal struts, avoiding where the flames of the candles would be.

“There’s not enough. Here, take some more.” Bea walked up the other side of the steps and passed Eleanor more mistletoe.

“Good God!” a voice said.

Eleanor looked at the doorway as she struggled to add more mistletoe. It was rare to hear Nathaniel make an outburst about anything to this degree. His loud voice captured her attention.

“Do you two intend to end up flat on your faces as you decorate this house?” He practically ran across the room and grabbed the ladder, which had begun to teeter rather dangerously. He leaned upon it, making it settle once more.

“It would not be the first time,” Bea said with a giggle from her place on the

ladder. “Do you remember last year, Eleanor? We went walking and couldn’t reach the mistletoe in the trees. When Eleanor’s back was turned, I climbed up to the mistletoe balls in the branches and pulled down a sprig. I lost my footing and fell.”

“Thank God I was there,” Eleanor said, trailing the last piece of mistletoe across the candelabra, “or you might have had a rather painful fall.”

“You caught her?” Nathaniel asked, looking up at Eleanor. She peered around the candles, looking at him with a humored smile.

“She fell right on me.”

Bea burst out laughing as Nathaniel did the same.

Eleanor released the mistletoe and climbed down the ladder once more, with Nathaniel offering a hand to help her when she got low enough. She gladly took it, though she didn’t really need it. She was just grateful for his attempt to help.

“It is the day for more Christmas decorations, then?” Nathaniel asked, placing his hands on his hips and looking around the room.

“What was your first clue?” Eleanor said with a giggle.

Bea had not wanted to concentrate on her lessons. With just a week to go until Christmas Day, she was intent on enjoying each moment to the max. Seeing that she wasn’t going to get anywhere in her teaching, Eleanor decided it was best to join her sister in her exuberance.

The library was currently covered in fresh evergreens and holly sprigs, along with paper chains that they had made from old parchment and paper that Bea had scribbled on, with notes no longer in use.

“What do you think of this?” Bea hurried toward their table and picked up a long chain so vast it swamped her and wrapped around her shoulders like a giant snake. “We made it out of my notes on Renaissance poets.”

“I see the lesson went well then,” Nathaniel teased, looking at Eleanor with a smile.

She returned that look, her stomach jolting. It seemed to be the same, every day now—whenever he looked at her, she felt silly and rather ridiculous, certain her face was blushing to the color of a tomato.

“Very well,” Eleanor said with a sigh. “So much so, we have turned my

lessons into paper chains. Would you help us? Please?” she asked, holding up the end of the paper chain that was still attached to Bea.

“Gladly.”

Nathaniel followed them around the house, helping in every way he could to attach paper chains and evergreens, even to the most difficult of places. As they worked together, Eleanor started humming Christmas carols, and Nathaniel joined in.

“Will we be able to do this next year?” Bea asked from her place on her haunches as she counted out the paper chains resting in her lap.

Above her, Eleanor stood, unfurling one of the chains as Nathaniel stood on a ladder beside her, trailing a paper chain around a pillar in their entrance hall.

“Of course we will,” she said without hesitation. “It’s our Christmas tradition. I still remember the first time I did this with you.” She smiled at the memory, nudging Bea with the toe of her boot to make her sister look up at her. “You could only just walk, and I made you follow me around the house as I put up the chains. You tugged most of them down again, thinking it was a game. I do not think I have ever laughed so much.”

“A fun tradition to have,” Nathaniel said, leaning on the top of the ladder and

looking at Eleanor.

“Did you not have such traditions?” she asked, passing up another chain to him. Their fingers brushed on the paper, but neither of them reacted. She had to wonder if it was in her imagination that they had touched at all.

“I did, but perhaps not as fun as yours. No, that’s unfair. I did have one tradition that I loved every year.” Nathaniel smiled, wrapping the next chain around the pillar. “Every Christmas Eve, David and I would sneak into the kitchens. The cook, Mrs. Willis, was a kind soul. She’d pretend to be horrified at our audacity then feed us up on her old mince pie recipe and gingerbread men iced in sugar and jellies. It was always a happy day.”

Eleanor couldn’t help admiring him as she stared up at him. He was a naturally happy person. The better she knew Nathaniel, the more she realized how wrong she had been about him that first night she had seen him, believing him to be austere and rather sharp in nature. He was warm of heart, and happy, it was just that others had been unfair to him in his life.

“I miss those days,” he said, looking at her again. “I rather hoped I’d be able to introduce such an idea to my own children someday.”

“You’d like children?” she asked, leaning on the other side of the library steps.

“Someday, I would, yes.” He nodded at Bea. “The way you are with your sister, I take it you do too.”

“She’d have a child tomorrow if she could,” Bea answered for her.

“Bea!” Eleanor hissed, turning red once more.

“It’s true.” Bea laughed, though that laughter quickly stopped. “What I meant, Eleanor, was when you are married to Mr. Briarhurst and far away from here, you might not be able to come back and decorate this house with me.”

“Wherever I am, we will decorate it. You could come and decorate my house with me,” Eleanor insisted, though she couldn’t look either Bea or Nathaniel in the eye now. She was well aware Nathaniel was doing his best to catch her gaze. “What is it?” She gave up and returned that look in the end.

“Mr. Briarhurst may not want such a thing. He is not the sort of man who goes in for such decorations as these.” He nodded at the paper chains.

Eleanor shifted her weight between her feet, nervous. She loved these sorts of decorations. They were rustic and homemade, but it was what she was used to and what she loved.

“Maybe I could persuade him.”

Yet the words hung in the air rather awkwardly between the three of them. When Bea spoke again, Eleanor was glad of the distraction.

“You are staying for Christmas, aren’t you, Nathaniel?” Bea asked.

“I am.” Nathaniel smiled warmly. “I thought business might take me away sooner, but I can at least stay until after New Year.”

“Good! We like having you here,” Bea said pointedly. “Don’t we, Eleanor?”

“We do.” Eleanor couldn’t look at Nathaniel as she said the words, rather afraid he’d see just how much she did like having him here.

He felt a part of the family, not afraid to join in putting up Christmas decorations and singing carols, nor talking to her father about serious matters. In some ways, it was strange to think he hadn’t been in this house before now.

“You are staying, then?” Eleanor asked, longing to have it confirmed a second time.

“I am.” His voice deepened as he took another paper chain from her. “I’m not going anywhere just yet.”

She glanced up at last, unable to look away from him any longer. He winked at her, and she didn’t know what that action meant, but it made her feel warm all the same. She wondered if one of the reasons he was staying past New Year was because of her, but then she told herself she was being foolish. After all, she was courting the very man who had taken his family’s fortune. He had little reason to form an attachment to her.

Despite the thought, she continued to smile up at him in such a silly way that when Bea elbowed her in the knee to get her attention, she jumped.

“Ho! Triptan? You are sure?” Nathaniel jumped up on the side of the ship. Clinging to the rigging, he leaned out, looking as far down the ship as he could. The captain of the ship was in a dinghy at the side of the ship, examining some damage to the hull along with a shipbuilder beside him, who was nodding repeatedly.

“Aye, we are sure, Your Grace,” Captain Triptan shouted up again. “We’ll be leaving on the morrow as promised.”

Nathaniel grimaced and looked out across the docks. It was imperative the ship made it to the Americas on time, both for his business affairs and also for the improved investments of Lord Wessex.

He had promised Richard personally he would ensure some of his correspondence was delivered by the men who worked on the ship for him. If the ship could not leave, it would mean breaking a promise—and that was something that grated deep in Nathaniel’s gut.

“I do not want the crew in danger,” he called to Triptan again. “Are you certain you can make this journey with this damage?”

Triptan had another hurried conversation with the shipbuilder beside him, then grabbed some of the rigging that hung down the side of the ship and scrambled up. Dressed in a loose shirt, even with the snow, he gritted his teeth against the cold and hadn’t bothered with a coat. The weathered man stood up on the deck beside Nathaniel, grinning broadly.

“Aye, I’m sure. I’ve seen such damage before, and the builder assures me he can have it fixed by the end of the day. Don’t worry about us, Your Grace. We can leave tomorrow morning as planned, but you won’t be joining us?”

“Not yet, no. Next time I shall come with you.” Nathaniel tried not to overthink his reasons for staying behind. It had always been an option to return on this journey, though nothing had ever been set in stone, but there were many things keeping him here.

He hadn't finished the matter of this brother's will. Despite the ill fortune he'd had with the lawyers so far, he intended to keep discovering what he could. If he could at least take a few books from the family's library, he would be content at this point. He planned to stay, to see the matter through until he could go no further, but it would be a lie to himself to pretend there wasn't another reason for staying.

Eleanor.

He told himself he was staying with the whole family. They all wanted him there, especially for Christmas and New Year, but something in Nathaniel's gut told him if he left now, there was one person more than any other that he would miss. That was plainly Eleanor.

“Well, I'll leave you to it,” Nathaniel said, making his way back across the ship and toward the frost-covered docks. “See a message is sent to Lord Wessex's house for when the ship departs.”

“Aye, Your Grace. Will do.”

“Oh, and Triptan?” Nathaniel turned back and offered his hand. “I wish you a safe journey.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” They shook hands and parted ways, each offering a well wish to the other before they parted.

Nathaniel turned the collar of his frock coat up against the cold as he left the dockyard and reached for where his horse was waiting for him, further back from the Thames. The horse was being looked after by a young boy, and Nathaniel was careful to give him a few extra coins than they had initially agreed.

“You have a coat, boy?” Nathaniel asked the young lad, who shook his head. He couldn’t have been more than thirteen and stood there shivering in the cold. “Then take this.” He shrugged off his frock coat and passed it to the boy. “Don’t trade it for money, now. It’s important to stay warm in weather like this.”

The boy took the coat, staring at it as if Nathaniel had given him a garment made of gold. “Thank you, sir. Thank you indeed.”

“That is no matter. Go now and find somewhere to get warm.”

Nathaniel pulled himself up into the saddle and flicked the reins of the horse, urging the animal on through the snow, traversing the parts of the road where the snow was at its thinnest. With fresh flakes falling from the sky, he shivered against that cold, but he did not regret his decision to give away the coat.

Something he had learned many years ago from dealings with his parents was that not everyone always saw the suffering that was standing beside him. If his coat could keep that boy warm this Christmas, then it was a gift well worth making.

With letters tucked in his pocket, Nathaniel made his way to the post office. Since his return, he had mostly sent messengers to the post office for him, but today as he was at the docks, it seemed pointless to send anyone else in his place. Tacking up the horse outside of the post office, he hurried inside, blowing on his gloved hands to try and bring some warmth to him.

At once, he went with the other people in the shop to the open fire, trying to warm himself by the flames. He waited his turn patiently, noting that more than one lady and gentleman looked his way with curious gazes, either wondering at the fineness of his clothes, or where his coat was in this weather. When he reached the front of the line, Nathaniel paid the postage for his letters and waited.

“Who is the sender, sir?” the man behind the desk asked, picking up a quill and dipping the nib in a black ink well beside him.

“The Duke of Windhaven.” Nathaniel tried to keep his voice low, but one other person in the shop behind him heard the name, and it was merely seconds before all in the shop were repeating it. He heard the name hissing in his ear like a strange eerie echo.

“The Duke of Windhaven...”

“Who did you say?” A man appeared through the open doorway behind the till. Large of figure with great club-like hands, he waddled forward. “Your name, sir? What did you say it was?”

“The Duke of Windhaven.” Nathaniel frowned, curious at the reaction. “Why?”

“I needed to be sure. That’s all.” The man shook his head, scarcely blinking as he stared at the man. “I got a letter for you, Your Grace. Came a year ago, but not enough postage was given to it. Couldn’t bring myself to throw it away. Bearing in mind who the sender was, I thought it was too important.”

He retreated into the back of the office. Nathaniel moved to the side as the young man behind the till served others in the shop. Nathaniel warmed himself by the fire, rubbing his gloved hands together.

Eventually, the shop owner returned. He had a small letter in his hands.

“Do you have a way to prove your identity, Your Grace?” he asked, somewhat nervously. “Your name, I mean, not just the title. I’ve held onto this letter for a long time. I want to make sure it goes to the right person.”

“Of course.” Nathaniel reached for his wallet where he had bank cheques in his name, not just his title. His name was written plainly in black ink, *Nathaniel Margrave*.

“Good, good, thank you.” He passed over the letter into Nathaniel’s hands.

“Who’s it from?” Nathaniel asked.

“The late Duke of Windhaven. Thank you, Your Grace.” He nodded his head and retreated once more.

Nathaniel looked down at the letter in his grasp, seeing that, strangely, it was indeed his brother’s handwriting on the front of the letter, yet there was something odd about it. Where David’s handwriting had always been firm, clearly legible, this writing was slightly shaky, as if he’d written it in a rush.

What was more, plainly not enough postage had been placed on the letter. David would not make such a mistake; his letters had gotten to Nathaniel on every other occasion.

With curiosity burning in his mind, Nathaniel ripped open the red wax seal.

Chapter 17

My dear brother, Nathaniel,

Forgive the state of my writing. As I'm writing this, struggling with each word; my energy is failing me, my body growing weak. I've always prized myself on my strong constitution, but I now realize that was a foolish thing to be proud of indeed. Any one of us can get struck down by any illness, at any time. Pride has no place in this world.

It was a strange statement to make. Nathaniel reached for a small wooden chair and sat down, bending over the letter as he stared at his brother's shaky words. Some of the letters ran together where they should not have done, and it took some deciphering to figure out what his brother meant.

In my last letter to you, I knew something was wrong. I believed at the time that it was a passing sickness, something that could potentially affect me for a few weeks, but no more. How wrong I was indeed. Pah! The nonsense of it! I foolishly clung to something our father once said. You'd think by now I would have learned that many of our father's lessons were flawed, but I did not.

I believed in his words—that as Dukes of Windhaven, we were born to hold this land, and to live comfortably in it. God's wounds, I feel like the greatest

of fools.

The doctor has just told me the truth of the matter. I have months, perhaps just weeks, to live. My lungs are heavily infected. I will not disgust you with the details of my ailment, but suffice it to say, it is no pretty picture. I have a physician practically living in the house now to watch over me. He is a good man, the kind of doctor our father would not have ever hired.

He was born of laborers, trained well in London, but I admire him greatly. He speaks factually and practically. He does not give false hope where another doctor lied to me and told me I'd recover, knowing it was what I wanted to hear. This physician, Doctor Horace Parkin, has made it plain the gravity of my situation.

He intends to make me comfortable in my final months, but there is little more he can do for me. He has urged me to set my affairs in order and to make my peace with the world and those in it.

He is right. There are many things I must atone for in my life, and many things I need to do before I say goodbye to this world.

First, there are things I wish you to know. I have changed much about the way I run this land and look after our tenants. I have installed a reservoir, so if we experience droughts again, our people will not suffer for it. I have ensured a welfare system so each tenant is cared for.

I found a list one day in our library, tucked away in a book on land management—it was a list written by you when you were just fifteen. How wise you were for a boy so young! You knew then all that could be done to improve this land and to take care of the people on it.

I want you to know this. I have followed each item on your list. I have added a few changes of my own, and I am assured by my steward that I have made a great difference to this property.

It is now my greatest fear that when I die, all our tenants could be thrown back into the turmoil they knew when our father looked after the land. That cannot happen, under any circumstances.

I know your life is in America. I know you have a wonderful life of adventure, of excitement, of all these new investments. You surely do not even need an estate now from all your success, but this land needs you. I do not care how long it takes you to come back, but please, Nathaniel, come home. Come home when you can. I wish to show you the changes I have made before I die, and you can take over the running of my land.

It is my wish. I do not care what argument existed between you and our father. That is the past, and now, we look to the future. Come and be the next Duke of Windhaven. Take this land and make it something new. Care for these tenants as you always wished to do.

I have no other wish before I die, other than to see what is right restored. You belong here, my brother. I only hope I can live long enough to see you here, and to show you all that I have done. To embrace you one last time, as I should have embraced you all those years ago.

Write back when you can.

Your loving brother,

David.

Such tears sprang to Nathaniel's eyes, he was in danger of bursting down into great crying sobs there in the post office. The confusion over David's wishes, his intents seemed to pale into insignificance for a moment. The fact he now read some of David's dying words, knew what pain his brother was going through, made everything so much worse.

Nathaniel stood up from the chair and burst out of the post office, startling so many people that they leaped out of the way as if he had burned them. In the road, the snow was coming down in a light flurry. He batted the flakes away from his eyelashes, his vision blurring though he was no longer certain if it was from the snow or his tears.

Poor David. My poor brother!

He pulled himself up into the saddle and thrust the letter into the pocket of his tailcoat. There was much he had to know, much he had to learn now about his brother's final months, but if this letter was anything to go by, then Nathaniel's first impressions of that will have been right.

Something is amiss. Some sort of plot has been afoot here, and David's true intentions have been lost amongst it.

He flicked the reins of the horse. Angered to be out in the snow, the horse initially refused to move anywhere. Yet Nathaniel was in no mood. He had to bear with this weather, and for now, the horse would have to bear with it too. There were things to be done! He flicked the reins and dug his heels in. This time, the horse shot off down the road.

In his haste, Nathaniel had to dart around carriages that struggled and slid in the snow. More than one horse was spooked by the flurry, pulling on their harnesses and in danger of overturning onto the ground. Nathaniel's steed rode one, snorting and bending his nose low to the road.

They traveled far away from the docks on the Thames, deep into the city itself, crossing through backstreets. Some roads were piled so high with snow, they were impossible to traverse. Nathaniel had to pull the horse to a sharp halt at the end of these roads and choose a different path altogether.

At one point, he was completely lost, struggling to see through the snowfall and discern one building from another. Quite by chance, he appeared in Covent Garden, recognizing the piazza square.

“We’re here. We’re here, boy.” He patted the neck of the horse who snorted and then whinnied loudly, turning his nose up to the air.

Nathaniel jumped down from the horse and pulled him under the roof of the piazza, where he could be sheltered by the snow. He paid a young boy nearby to watch over the horse, and the boy nodded eagerly, clutching tightly to the reins, then Nathaniel ran toward the solicitor’s offices.

As he ran, Nathaniel’s eyes stung with tears again. He wiped his cheeks, angered and feeling as if he had been cheated. If this letter had been sent to him, if enough postage had been put on the letter, it would have reached him. He would have gotten the first ship he could have away from America and raced to his brother’s side. He might have been able to see David one last time before he was lost to the world.

Nathaniel kicked out at a stack of snow beside him, toppling the icy mounds over in his frustration.

The world was cruel indeed to do this to him. Not only had he been cheated of many years with his brother, but the dying moments, too. He would make

up for it, somehow. If he could not turn back the hands of his pocket watch and relive the last few months, then instead, he would discover what had gone wrong. How did David's bequest that *he* should inherit the estate become so muddled that the estate went to Mr. Briarhurst instead?

When he reached the door of the solicitor's office, it was closed and locked tight.

"Mr. Thackery?" he boomed through the door and banged on it three times with his fist. Pressing his eye to the glass pane in the door, he saw someone moving inside. "I need to talk to you."

"We are closed for the Christmas season. Come back in January." It was not Mr. Thackery's voice, but another, perhaps a clerk's voice.

"It cannot wait. If you do not unlock this door, I will force my way in."

"That is breaking and entering!"

"I have a greater crime to lay at your door if you do not let me in at this moment," Nathaniel called. "How about forgery?"

“Forgery!?” the voice spluttered from inside. The shadow moved toward the door, and it was quickly unlocked. It was indeed a clerk who stared at Nathaniel as if he had grown two heads. “Your Grace,” he muttered in surprise, hurrying to bow. “What do you mean, forgery?”

“Is he in?” Nathaniel pointed to the ceiling above, knowing from the last time he was here that Mr. Thackery’s office was upstairs.

“He is, but he’s finished for Christmas.”

“Not yet, he hasn’t.” Nathaniel pushed past the clerk and ran to the stairs.

“No. Your Grace! You cannot go up there.” The clerk ran after him.

Nathaniel ignored his words. He took the stairs two at a time, racing up to the landing. Rather than bothering to knock on the office door, he opened it wide.

Inside, Mr. Thackery was eating some sort of Christmas cake. He looked to be in his cups, a glass of half-drunk port beside him and his glass askew on his nose.

“Your Grace,” he said, dropping some of the crumbs of the cake down the

front of his jacket. “What is the meaning of this? I have closed for Christmas.”

“I am sorry, sir.” The clerk appeared behind Nathaniel in the doorway. “I could not stop him.”

“What is going on?” Mr. Thackery addressed Nathaniel alone.

“There are things I need to know.” Nathaniel strode toward the desk and reached for the letter in his pocket. The cold had gotten into his bones now, after riding for so long in the snow without a coat. He shivered, his fingers trembling as he took the letter and flattened it to the desk.

“From my brother. Stuck at a post office this last year because it did not have enough postage to get to America. In it, he says he intended to leave the state to me. *Me*, Mr. Thackery. Not to Mr. Briarhurst.”

Mr. Thackery promptly dropped the rest of the Christmas cake. The marzipan and icing separated from the fruit loaf, rolling away across the desk. With crumbs on his fingers, he picked up the letter, struggling to straighten the glasses on his nose again.

“When was the last will written?”

“What?”

“The will before the one you read out after David’s death.” Nathaniel spoke so quickly, he was aware he barely made sense. Still, he didn’t slow down. He just spoke sharper and waved his hands in the air. “The one before the last. When was that written?”

“Years ago.” Mr. Thackery waved his hands in the air. “Shortly after your father died. It was short and to the point, more a will of necessity that was done at the time because I insisted your brother had one in place.”

“Then, how did you receive the new one? Was it sent to you in the post?”

“Well... yes.” Mr. Thackery finished reading the letter. He lowered it down to the desk and rubbed his hands together, shedding the last few crumbs of the fruitcake from his skin. “It arrived one day.”

“You did not write it up yourself?”

“No. David had written to me the week before, asking for particulars on how to draw one up himself. It was plainly his intent to rewrite it.” Mr. Thackery stood hurriedly. He staggered in his drunkenness and the clerk hurried into

the room, past Nathaniel's elbow in his effort to help his master.

They reached for a stack of shelves and a box that clearly referred to David's case. They sifted through the papers before Mr. Thackery pulled out another letter.

"Here it is. Dated..." He shuddered, sitting down shakily in his chair once more. "It is dated the same day as this letter you have given me now."

Nathaniel turned on the spot, his hands in his hair in stress. Things were coming together now. When David knew he did not have long left for this world, he wrote to Nathaniel, pleading with him to come back at one—then he wrote to Mr. Thackery, too, intent on changing his will.

"Then the new will arrived? When?"

"A week later." Mr. Thackery looked at more papers handed to him by the clerk, checking the dates.

"And, when did he die?" Nathaniel's voice grew slightly calmer now.

Mr. Thackery and the clerk looked at one another, apparently both nervous

about answering such a question.

“When did he die!” Nathaniel spluttered, loudly this time. “In relation to when the new will arrived at your door, when did he die?”

“It arrived two days before he died,” he said calmly.

Nathaniel staggered back. For one minute, he thought he might topple over in the shock of it all. He reached for the mantelpiece over the fireplace, noting for the first time that a fire was lit in the room. He braced himself against the mantelpiece, keeping himself standing. Despite the heat, it didn’t warm his body. He was too far gone into the cold now.

“Two days,” he muttered repeatedly.

It was so near to the time. What could have happened in that week to change things? Had David spoken to someone who had changed his mind? No, surely not. That letter was so full of heart and feeling, he couldn’t imagine David changing his mind after that.

Being ill, David must have sent a footman to the post office with some change for the postage. In his sickness, he must have neglected to give the footman enough money for the charge. That was why it had gotten stuck and never reached Nathaniel.

“Could it have been forged?” Nathaniel looked over his shoulder at Mr. Thackery and the clerk. The clerk jumped and held a hand to his chest as if he had been shot.

“What? No!” Mr. Thackery moved to his feet, his hunched form suddenly straightening. He managed to knock his claret glass off the desk and the red liquid flew across the carpet. The clerk bent down and dabbed at the stain, trying to mop it up. “Everything was in order,” Mr. Thackery said hurriedly. “Witnesses had signed it.”

“Who were the witnesses?”

“I...” Mr. Thackery looked down at the box before him. “The will is in storage. In another of my offices.”

“And the other?”

“What?”

“The old will. Did you ever compare my brother’s signature to the one on his first will? Have you ever looked at them side by side?”

The silence seemed to stretch out for an infinite amount of time. Nathaniel stared at the solicitor, watching realization dawn on his face. Eventually, Mr. Thackery shook his head.

“Get that will,” Nathaniel ordered, stepping away from the mantelpiece.

“It is in storage too. I need to go to my other office.”

“Then get it. Along with the other will,” Nathaniel moved to the desk as he spoke. “Get both wills, compare them, find out who witnessed them, then send me a note at Lord Wessex’s house. If you do not, I will be back at this office every day until I find out what happened to my brother’s final wishes. Is that understood?”

“Y-yes.” Mr. Thackery stammered. “It shall be done. I shall send you word, Your Grace.”

“Good.” Nathaniel snatched up his brother’s letter once more. He carefully removed the fruitcake crumbs from the surface and pocketed it once more, then he turned from the room without a goodbye and marched back out, down the stairs, and into the snowy street.

Something was very wrong indeed. Now the wild idea had taken up place in his mind, it wasn't something he could shake himself free from. What if David's will had been forced after all? If he was in such a state of decline that by this point, David's handwriting was shaky, how could he have even signed a new will? Maybe he didn't sign it at all. Maybe Mr. Briarhurst signed it for him. Maybe Mr. Briarhurst had forged the will.

When he had first heard about the inheritance, something in his gut had told him maybe the will was forged, but he'd not wanted to believe it. He should have followed his instinct after all.

Chapter 18

“He is late back,” Richard said, standing from his place at the card table and moving to the window. “It is not like Nathaniel.”

“I am sure he is well, Father.” Despite her words, Eleanor was equally worried. In her distraction, she had lost every single card game she had played with Bea and her father. She wasn’t even certain she had scored a single point in their rounds of cribbage. Repeatedly, she glanced at the window, watching the falling snow. “We could send someone out to look for him?”

“In this weather? No. It would be unfair of me to ask any footman to make that journey.” Richard turned back to face Eleanor and Bea, folding his arms. “He is late, though.”

They had already had dinner and darkness was starting to fall. Bea yawned as she gathered the cards together, for her bedtime was quickly approaching.

“You should get some sleep, Bea.” Seeing an opportunity to distract her father, Eleanor looked at him and nodded at Bea.

“Yes. Come, Bea. Time you went to bed.” Richard crossed the room toward her and offered his hand. “Why don’t you read me that new book of yours tonight? I know you like it.”

Bea nodded, struggling to get her mouth around another yawn as she took their father’s hand. Richard led her out of the room, the candle on the card table beside Eleanor flickering as the door shut behind them. The moment she heard the stairs creaking under their weight, Eleanor leaped out of her chair and ran to the window. Planting her nose to the glass, she peered out at the snow.

It was as if the whole world was covered in a blanket of ice. The skeletal tree’s arms had turned white, and the walls of the estate were barely discernible from the ground. Even if Nathaniel returned now, his horse would have a hard time in the snow.

She wasn’t sure how long she waited, watching as the sun went down, but eventually, a figure appeared on the drive.

“Nathaniel?” she whispered to the air and darted from the room, flinging herself through the entrance hall and at the front door. She opened it wide, seeing Nathaniel was making slow progress down the driveway. His body was hunched forward, the horse’s nose bent down too as he struggled with the weather.

When the butler appeared behind her, Eleanor urged him to fetch the stable

boy so he could take the horse. The butler hurried off to do as she asked and Eleanor strode out, down the front porch steps toward Nathaniel.

He came clearly into view through the falling snow, his mouth buried in the collar of his tailcoat.

“Where’s your frock coat?” she called to him, noting how pale his skin was and how much he shivered.

“I gave it away.” He waved his hand in the air and lowered himself down from the saddle. He slipped in the snow and Eleanor ran forward, hardly caring if the snow came over her shoes and chilled her ankles. She caught Nathaniel under the arm, steadying him.

“You’re ill.”

“I’m perfectly well.”

“Look how you shiver? You are ill indeed!”

The stable boy appeared in a rush and gathered the horse. Nathaniel patted the neck of the steed, as if in thanks, then allowed Eleanor to steer him up the

stairs. She noted just how he moved, with great difficulty and lethargy, up the stairs. She had to force him forward with every step.

“You feel like ice,” she marveled in fear. She steered him straight through the entrance hall and into the sitting room, shutting the door behind them. She moved him toward the fireplace and kicked the screen aside, adding more coal to the grate as she urged him to sit down. He chose the footstool closest to the fire, not bothering with one of the armchairs.

He shook so much; it was as if the ground quaked beneath his feet. “Kick those boots off. They must be soaked through.”

He did as she said, pushing them away with his foot. She reached for his tailcoat next and pulled that off too. His shirt was damp on his forearms, but otherwise, the tailcoat had done a reasonable job of keeping him dry.

Next, Eleanor rang the bell and called for hot tea to be brought at once, as well as the soup they’d had for dinner. The whole time, Nathaniel said nothing. He sat by the fire, continuing to shake, his dark hair damp and curling at his temple even more than usual. Hunched forward, with his elbows on his knees, he stared at the flames.

“Nathaniel?” Eleanor dropped down to her knees at his side, resting her hand on his arm. “Why have you been out riding in this weather? You could catch a chill.”

“It was worth it.” He continued to stare into the flames, not looking at her.

“Where is your coat? What do you mean you gave it away?”

“There was a boy looking after my horse on the docks. He wore so little.” He grimaced at the idea, shaking his head. “I gave him the coat. He needed it more than I.”

Eleanor’s heart ached even more. When the butler returned carrying the tea and soup, she took it from him at once and urged the tureen into Nathaniel’s hands.

“I cannot eat.” He leaned back, clearly intending to refuse it.

“No matter what turmoil has happened to you today,” she lowered her voice, making sure the butler could not hear her, “and believe me, I can tell something has upset you.” Nathaniel’s gaze snapped to her at these words. “Making yourself ill will not help anything. Please, Nathaniel. Please eat.”

Slowly, he nodded and took the tureen from her.

“Bring blankets please,” she urged Garrison. “And have a warm bath prepared in the duke’s room.”

“Of course, my lady.” He bowed and hurried out of the room once more, looking as worried as Eleanor felt.

As the door closed behind Garrison, she took another footstool and dragged it forward, placing the tea tray down on the hearth, so the two of them could cower close to the flames. She poured out the tea and thrust that into his hands too, so he struggled to balance both, sipping from both.

“What has happened?” she asked after a minute or so of silence.

“Much. Though you would not believe it if I told you. Who would believe it?” He stared at the fire as if he was talking to himself rather than her at all. “The gossip about me is so foul, and so good about him, who would possibly believe it?”

“Who are you talking about? Nathaniel, you are not making any sense.”

In his distraction and shivering, he nearly tipped the soup over himself. Eleanor caught his hand and straightened it. The touch seemed to bring some sense to him. He looked at her, their gazes connected, when they realized

how close they were sitting together.

“You and I should not be like this, Eleanor,” he whispered, his voice soft. Despite his words, she didn’t pull away. It was the reassurance Eleanor so longed for.

“I cannot hang back when I see you in this state. I am too worried for you.”

“You do not need to worry for me.”

“Too late,” she said with a sad sort of smile. “I care for you, Nathaniel. That means I worry for you when you are in this state.”

His face softened for the first time. He was no longer so rigid, nor so stiff.

“What has happened?”

Eleanor jerked back when she heard her father’s voice. The door had opened, and Richard returned, carrying a blanket that Garrison must have given him on the way. Eleanor took the blanket from her father and wrapped it around Nathaniel’s shoulders.

“I went to the post office,” Nathaniel began slowly as Richard reached the fireplace. Just as Eleanor had done, he added more coal to the grate. “My brother sent me a letter before he died. It was never sent. Not enough postage.” He shook his head repeatedly. Unable to say the words anymore, he passed his teacup into Eleanor’s grasp to hold for a minute, then he pulled out a letter and swapped it with the teacup. “Read it,” he pleaded with her.

Eleanor returned to the stool with her father hanging over her shoulder, reading the letter. By the time Eleanor was done, she was on the verge of tears. David’s words were so heartfelt, so full of love and longing, it was easy to see how any man could be broken by reading such a letter. Yet there was more to be confused about here, something more that didn’t make sense.

“He was going to leave the estate to you,” Richard said, the very thing Eleanor was thinking. “Then, what went wrong?”

“That is exactly what I need to know.” Nathaniel continued to stare into the fireplace. “Come tomorrow, I intend to find out more. What was the doctor’s name he mentioned again?”

Eleanor looked over the letter.

“Doctor Horace Parkin.”

“An unusual enough name. Tomorrow, I shall find him. I will discover from someone who was in the house that week, who was there when my brother died, who may have even been there when the will was signed, what actually happened that week.” He drank the tea and at last stopped shivering.

Unsure what to say, Eleanor placed her hand over Nathaniel’s as he returned the tea to the tray. As the three of them talked, she and Nathaniel sat there hand in hand. She didn’t consider if it was inappropriate, for he was her friend and he needed support. To her relief, her father didn’t question why she had taken Nathaniel’s hand, either.

“You do not have to come with me,” Nathaniel said as he stood by the door of the house, peering out the windows. At last, the fresh snowfall had stopped and overnight, the snow on the ground had compacted a little, but the roads would still be no easy thing to traverse. It would be a difficult journey indeed.

“I will simply follow you through the snow if you say no.” Eleanor’s upbeat words made him turn around to face her.

Never had Nathaniel been warmed by anyone’s presence so much as he was at that moment with Eleanor walking toward him. She had on those tatty gloves once more, her thick fur pelisse with a shawl across her shoulders, and

a bonnet pulled down and fastened tightly under her chin.

“Besides, it is either my father or me accompanying you,” she said with a smile. “He and I both agreed last night that you are not going alone today. Imagine if you give away another frock coat?” She nodded at his attire and the fresh coat he had on. “You risked illness last night. Clearly, you need watching over a little.”

“I can take care of myself,” he insisted. When her eyebrows furrowed together, he smiled a little. “Mostly. When I’m not distracted.”

“It is the same for anyone. We can all take care of ourselves. It doesn’t mean that sometimes, we couldn’t do with the help, especially when our minds are distracted.” She stepped forward and took his arm. “Come. Let us find this doctor you seek.”

They walked out of the house and toward the carriage Richard had prepared for them. A light brougham carriage that was pulled by just one horse, it would travel better over the compacted snow. Together, they climbed inside, and the space was so small, that their arms brushed as the carriage set off.

Nathaniel longed to tell Eleanor what the evening before had meant to him, how her care of him, her simple holding of his hand, had given him comfort when his mind was in turmoil.

Something that still baffled him this morning was how she and Richard together had managed to lighten his mood, to make him smile when it was something he hadn't felt like doing in the slightest. They had made him think of other things when he was in need of ultimate distraction from despair.

They are like my family now. When did that happen?

They headed to Harley Street, a road known for its famous doctors. The first few doors they called upon were not promising, with no one having heard of the doctor, but eventually, they heard some news.

“Ah, you need Soho.”

“Soho?” Nathaniel said in surprise, staring at the young doctor before him who smiled in answer.

“Mr. Horace Parkin comes from a lowly background. It's the oddity of this street that not everyone is welcoming of such doctors. Foolish opinion, if you ask me.” The doctor shook his head. “Mr. Parkin and I often meet to go to the lectures at the hospitals. A man dedicated to his work.” He gave a full address and Nathaniel retreated to the carriage with Eleanor once more.

“What will you ask this man when you find him?” Eleanor said as the

carriage started to slow down in Soho, searching for the address.

“What he saw of my brother, what he heard him say, all of it.” Nathaniel’s gloved hands balled into fists at his side. “I’m tired of merely guessing at what happened that last week. I was so convinced this last year that David and I were on good terms again. This letter confirms it, that he wished me to have the estate. How could that change within the matter of a week? Unless it didn’t change at all?”

“But if it didn’t change, you are suggesting the letter was forged, are you not? Do you think then that he...” She broke off, swallowing uncomfortably.

Never had Nathaniel felt more guilty. He knew well enough by now that Eleanor did not love Mr. Briarhurst, but she was looking at him as a potential husband.

“I will not besmirch Mr. Briarhurst’s name without proof.” His voice deepened as he turned to face her fully. “I would not do that to you.”

“To me?” she spluttered. “This is about you!”

“And you now, by association,” he reminded her. “I will find out everything I can before I dare make an accusation against a man you think you will marry.”

She looked down between them. Nathaniel was suddenly aware of how their arms brushed as the carriage rocked from side to side. Increasingly, he felt sick just at the thought of Eleanor marrying any other man at all.

Any other man but me.

He had to tear himself away from the thought. He couldn't indulge in the thought now as the carriage halted and he stepped down, walking toward the house that the footman pointed out to him.

Snow had been cleared from a small path in front of the house, leading up to a black door. On the door was a wreath covered in holly with the red berries glowing starkly against the white ice. The black railing bordered the front of the small building and those on either side of it. It was a well-kept house, perhaps not as expensive as those in Harley Street, but still a good house.

Nathaniel stopped in front of the door, glancing back to see Eleanor was behind him.

“This may not be easy to hear,” he reminded her. “We’re going to talk of sickness.”

“I know,” she said softly. “But it will be harder for you when he is your brother, will it not? I’m coming in with you, Nathaniel.”

He longed to reach out and take her hand again, to show what such words meant to him. In the end, he held himself back. They were outside now, with people running back and forth in the snowy street, heading to their destinations. He couldn’t be so informal and intimate with her now.

He turned back to the door and knocked slowly.

“Coming!” a rather buoyant voice called from inside.

Footsteps hurried forth. A mere minute later, the door opened, and a young man appeared on the other side. He was rather short, and bounced on his toes as he came to a stop. His fair hair was brushed back from his forehead, and his shirt sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. He wiped his hands on a cloth, and the smell of turpentine hung off his clothes. The easy smile he wore on his face faded when he looked at Nathaniel.

“David? I mean...” He broke off and shook his head.

Nathaniel blinked, uncertain what to make of this statement. Not only had the doctor thought he was his brother for one mad minute, but he had addressed

him as ‘David,’ not ‘Your Grace.’

“I have found the right man I see then.” Nathaniel bowed his head. “I am the late Duke of Windhaven’s brother.”

“You’re...” The man raised a hand from the cloth and pointed at Nathaniel. “You are Nathaniel Margrave, the new Duke of Windhaven?”

“I am.” Nathaniel nodded slowly, wary of what the man’s reaction would be next.

“Oh. What a joy it is to meet you at last.” He suddenly out of the house and grasped Nathaniel’s hand, as if they had known each other for years, and shook heartily. “I heard your brother talk of you so much. It is a pleasure, a great pleasure indeed. Please, come in, come in out of this snow, and your friend too, please. Oh, what a shock this is!” He strode into the house and Nathaniel offered for Eleanor to go in first.

She stepped past him, lowering her voice so only he could hear her.

“You look like your brother?”

“I never knew I looked like him that much.” For some reason, it was a comfort to Nathaniel, as if a part of David was still with him.

Chapter 19

“I do not understand this.” Doctor Parkin repeatedly shook his head as he poured out tea. When his hands started to shake, Eleanor stood from her seat.

“Please, let me,” she said and took the teapot. It seemed the shocks were coming one after another for everyone around her. She had sat there, without saying a word, as Nathaniel described how the estate had gone to Mr. Briarhurst. To say Doctor Parkin was shocked was an understatement. His jaw had gone so slack it practically hit the floor.

“I just, oh, thank you.” He let Eleanor take the teapot as he sat down in a creaky chair on the other side of the fireplace from Nathaniel. It was a small and comfortable room, one of the doctor’s personal rooms rather than a place where he saw his patients. “Your brother said he was leaving the estate to you.”

“You heard him say that?” Nathaniel asked, with clear hope tinging his voice. “Forgive me for saying this, Doctor, for prying, but it seems you and my brother must have been friends, as well as you being his doctor. Just now, you called me ‘David.’”

“I did.” Doctor Parkin sighed as he sat back in the chair.

Eleanor served up the tea and passed a cup to the doctor. When she passed a cup to Nathaniel, their fingers brushed together on the saucer and he looked at her, his eyes lingering on her for a moment.

“We were friends.” Doctor Parkin gazed at the fire as he spoke. “He was desperate for an opinion other than the one the other doctors were giving him. Your brother was no fool, your Grace. He knew he was being lied to. His footman turned up here one day, for I had treated his footman once. He said the situation was desperate and could I come look at the duke.” He smiled rather sadly.

“I think my manner shocked your brother at first. I tend not to bother with formalities, and I do not often treat the upper classes or those among the *ton*. By the end of our first meeting, he found my manner endearing rather than shocking.”

“So, you became friends?” Eleanor encouraged him on as she took the chair beside Nathaniel.

“We did.” Doctor Parkin nodded. “I vowed to him to tell him the truth, and that I did. He had consumption, Your Grace.” He winced as he looked at Nathaniel. “It is no easy or simple sickness, and few recover. I had to be honest with your brother on my prognosis.”

“Thank you.” Nathaniel nodded, bending forward. He seemed to have lost any strength in his spine. Since the night before, Eleanor hadn’t seen him in any other position than this hunched form. “I think my brother treasured that honesty above all else.”

“We passed the time as his sickness grew worse. We played cards and read books. He told me of his changes for the land and talked too of how he hoped you would take over, and what changes you would make yourself.” Doctor Parkin gestured to him.

“And Mr. Briarhurst?” Nathaniel asked.

Saying the name might as well have punched Doctor Parkin in the gut. He shifted in his seat, rubbing his chest, looking very ill at ease.

“He was a dear friend to your brother.” It was the first time Doctor Parkin’s words had been tight, and not so forthcoming in tone.

“What does that mean?” Nathaniel asked. “You are hiding something, Doctor. What do you mean by such a strange tone?”

“My opinion on the man is immaterial.” He was of course a man who did not read the scandal sheets, nor did he hear of the news of the *ton*. Just as he had not known the Windhaven fortune had not gone to Nathaniel, he did not

know Eleanor was courting Mr. Briarhurst either, for he didn't glance her way as he spoke. "Your brother held him in high esteem. That should be the end of the matter."

"No. It cannot be the end." Nathaniel shook his head. "Would I be right in thinking Mr. Briarhurst was around a lot that last week of my brother's life?"

"He was in and out of the house constantly, that I cannot deny. I think he endeavored to help the steward in some amount of running the estate. He handled your brother's correspondence, too."

Nathaniel sat back abruptly. "He handled the correspondence?"

"Yes."

Eleanor looked at Nathaniel, baffled by his expression. He said nothing but had clearly realized something great indeed, for it had changed his manner completely.

"Two days before my brother died," Nathaniel began nervously, fidgeting so much, he was in danger of dropping his teacup. Eleanor took the saucer from him, saving it before it could fall. He nodded with thanks in her direction. "He wrote a new will."

Doctor Parkin frowned. “That’s not possible.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...” Doctor Parkin shifted completely. “Are you telling me he wrote a new will? Or he signed one?”

“That he wrote it.” Nathaniel’s answer was firm. “The solicitor answered an enquiry of my brother’s, telling him how to write one up, and then David sent one back to him.”

“Well, I find that baffling.” Doctor Parkin shook his head once more. “Two days before he died, your brother was flat on his back, choking on blood.”

Nathaniel flinched.

“I am sorry.” The doctor held out his hand hurriedly. “It is unpleasant to hear, but it is the truth. He trembled and shook, his body was weak, and he spent much of the day asleep. If you told me his steward had written a new will at his instructions, I could just about believe that. If his signature was shaky, if he had signed with a cross instead of his name, then perhaps—but no, wait. That doesn’t make sense either.”

“Why not?” Eleanor asked, when she saw Nathaniel had fallen quite silent and seemed to struggle for words.

“Because I spent the whole day with him,” Doctor Parkin answered calmly. “The only time I was out of your brother’s company was to go to the privy. I wouldn’t dare leave him alone any longer. He was too sick. The steward would have had to be fast indeed to get the instructions for a new will, write it up, and then get him to sign it. I just... I do not understand.”

“Neither do I,” Nathaniel spoke eventually with a sigh. “But you are convinced, Doctor? It would be impossible for him to have written the will himself?”

“Completely impossible. In every way,” the doctor declared with feeling. “A spider had a better change of dropping in ink and writing a fully literate will and testament than your brother had that day. I do not understand. How could this have happened?”

Nathaniel looked at Eleanor.

They were thinking the same thing, and the fear was sickening. Was it possible that David’s will had been forged after all? If that was the case, then there was only one possible candidate for who could have forged it. Who

benefitted from the will? Who had inherited the estates and all that money?

Eleanor was now the one to shake. She placed both her cup and Nathaniel's on a sideboard, standing from her chair and looking away from the pair of them. Was it possible that she had been courting a man who could be so underhanded, who could be so vicious as to take advantage of his dying friend to steal an inheritance that should have always gone elsewhere?

"I thank you for your help, Doctor Parkin." Nathaniel's voice reached Eleanor's ears, but she could no longer turn around to watch the pair of them. She stared woodenly at the various glass vials on one of the doctor's sideboards instead, staring through them rather than at them. "There is one more thing I'd like to ask you, and this might sound strange, but it is something I'd truly like to know."

"Please, ask me anything." Doctor Parkin urged him on.

"Those last few days, I know my brother suffered. I cannot imagine the pain of it." Nathaniel sounded on the verge of tears. Eleanor rubbed a hand over an ache in her chest, wishing she could take away his suffering. "But did my brother smile in those days? Did he find a reason to be happy?"

"I am glad that on this occasion, I can answer you with some good news." Doctor Parkin's voice softened. "Your brother found contentment and peace. Often did he smile and talk of the hope he had for the tenants in the future. His one regret was not seeing you before he was lost to this world. I know

that.”

Nathaniel’s breath hitched and Eleanor turned around. She crossed the room toward him and placed a hand on his shoulder. He laid a hand over hers, the touch soft.

“I am sorry to not bring you and your wife better news,” the doctor said kindly.

“We are not married,” Nathaniel answered hurriedly, yet he didn’t retreat from her.

“Oh, my apologies.” Doctor Parkin nodded between the pair of them. “Well, I am sorry all the same.”

“Don’t be, Doctor.” Nathaniel smiled. “You have given me some important news, indeed. I’ll forever be thankful for it.”

Eleanor squeezed his shoulder in comfort and his fingers brushed hers once more.

Nathaniel felt as if he had been from one building to the next today, asking a myriad of questions. Some had helped, and some hadn't. When he had returned home, Eleanor was exhausted, and she had fallen asleep on his shoulder in the carriage.

He'd woken her as gently as he could before they both returned to the house. Nathaniel hadn't stayed in the house for long, though. Richard had taken his arm and dragged him back out, saying there was someone they had to meet.

"Are you sure about this?" Nathaniel asked, standing in the lane in the backroads of London. "This feels wrong." He wrinkled his nose as he looked up at the auditor's building. The accountant's offices were ominous indeed, the windows dark and the snow shoveled neatly away from the front door. "This is acting on gossip alone."

"I have no care for gossip, just as you do not." Richard shook his head, stepping down from the carriage behind Nathaniel. "Yet sometimes there is some truth in these matters, even if it is skewed by rumor. This has to be investigated. Based on everything you have said, what you and Eleanor discovered earlier today, we must be certain, my friend."

He clapped Nathaniel on the arm and strode forward to the house, leading the way.

For a moment, Nathaniel stood dumbstruck as he stared after Richard. When he had first returned from America, he never could have predicted this was the turn his life would take. Most of all, he couldn't have predicted Lord Wessex's friendship and that of his two daughters. When Nathaniel thought of how Eleanor had assisted him that day, and how Richard was now doing the same, he felt unworthy of their friendship and kindness.

"Come," Richard urged, waving a hand at the door. "Here is where we will discover the truth."

Stirred to life, Nathaniel strode forward and reached Richard's side. They knocked twice on the door before a clerk answered, pushing a pair of spectacles higher up his nose.

"It is late, sirs." He looked between the pair of them as he spoke, his voice mousy. "The master wishes to retire for Christmas."

"He will have one meeting more first." Richard held up his finger. "Please, this is very important. Our house will not be a happy one for Christmas otherwise."

Nathaniel held back his smile. Whereas he had demanded entry to the solicitor's the day before by marching in, Richard pleaded, playing on the man's own kindness.

The clerk nodded and let them inside. "I shall call for the master now. If you will excuse me." He took their names, bowed, and hurried out of the room.

Richard sat calmly in a small chair by the fire, but Nathaniel could not be so at peace. He marched up and down in front of the fire, continuously fiddling with the hat in his grasp, unable to settle.

"It is just gossip," he said again after a minute, thinking of what Richard had told him in the carriage."

"As I said, some gossip is just lies, while other gossip, well, there's a grain of truth in there, is there not?"

Nathaniel wished he could refute the words, but he couldn't. Even though the whispers of his argument with his own family were based on lies, the fact there had been an argument in the first place was all too true.

The accountant appeared a few minutes later. A very tall and lanky man, he had to bend through the adjoining doorway, brushing back the gray wiry hair at his ears, looking between the pair of them.

"Good day, gentlemen." He bowed swiftly. "Do you two wish to enquire as

to our services?”

“Not as such,” Nathaniel said with a deep tone.

The accountant’s eyes widened at the tone, though he said nothing. Richard stood, affecting an affable countenance.

“Good day to you, sir. Do I have the pleasure of speaking to Mr. Warren? Mr. Clark Warren?”

“You do indeed.”

“Excellent, excellent. I am Lord Wessex, and this is the Duke of Windhaven.” He nodded at Nathaniel.

“Ah. I see.” Mr. Warren seemed most interested in Nathaniel, staring at him a little longer.

“We are in need of your advice, sir.” Richard continued with a smile. “My friend and I here have received some distressing news, but with your good word, I am sure we can put such worries to bed.”

“Worries?” He seemed confused and folded his arms.

“We have heard rumors about the estates that used to belong to the Dukes of Windhaven.” Richard nodded at Nathaniel. “Yet, I am sure they are just rumors, are they not? As Mr. Briarhurst’s accountant, you can assure me at once they are rumors. Yes?”

Nathaniel turned away and looked into the fire. If he had come alone, he would have demanded to know the state that the finances were in, but Richard was going about this in a much more artful way.

“I cannot discuss any of my clients’ affairs. You must know that, my lord,” Mr. Warren said stoically.

“Yes, yes, of course. That is why I am not asking you for details,” Richard said, laughing at the idea. “To do so would be absurd and impertinent. No. I hope you will appreciate the awful world we sometimes find ourselves in. The *ton* is dependent on whispers, rumors, and what one can read in scandal sheets.

I shudder to think that we could learn of those estates being seized by debtors through a scandal sheet. I ask you for a favor now, as a kindness to the dear duke here, whose heart could be hurt by this news if it was to befall. Assure me there is no basis in the rumors that Mr. Briarhurst’s fortune is a dwindling

one. Assure me that the estates are safe. Yes?”

Nathaniel continued to stare into the fire, thinking of the way Richard had delivered this news to him in the carriage. He'd grimaced, saying a friend had come to him that morning, warning that Eleanor might soon be betrothed to a man who was losing money faster than a bucket with a hole was losing water.

This cannot be possible. It cannot be.

“Well, these things are private matters.” Seeing Mr. Warren didn't intend to give anything away, Nathaniel turned around once more. Perhaps there was no harm in going along with this artful way to discover the truth?

“This is a waste of our time, Richard. My brother left two estates and a vast fortune to Mr. Briarhurst, not to mention healthy farms. I heard from David himself that they were producing a good income. This is nonsense. I will choose to believe in Mr. Briarhurst's good character, and that the money is quite safe.” He walked toward the door, pulling on his hat again.

“Wait, Your Grace.”

Mr. Warren's voice made Nathaniel halt at the door. He turned back to face the accountant, waiting for more.

“I...” He seemed to struggle, shifting his weight between his feet audibly. “I cannot speak of the soundness of Mr. Briarhurst’s finances. That would be betraying the trust of a client. But I was your brother’s accountant too.”

Nathaniel raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Let me say this,” Mr. Warren spoke slowly, appearing to choose his words very carefully indeed. “It seems that Mr. Briarhurst’s affairs take up much more time than the same assets ever did for your brother.”

What does that mean?

“Thank you, thank you. I appreciate your words, sir. You have no idea how much. I wish you a merry Christmas, Mr. Warren.” Richard shook the accountant’s hand, and Mr. Warren wished him the same.

“But—” Nathaniel wished to stay to find out more, but Richard took his arm and steered him back out of the building. “What did that mean?”

“A well-run estate with simple finances takes up little time of an accountant. Trust me, I am a man who lost a lot of money in the past. My own accountant said I took up more of his time than any other client at the time,” Richard

explained in a rush. “I fear there is something Mr. Briarhurst is hiding about his finances. Something he is going to great lengths to mask.”

“Do you mean that the money is gone? All of my family’s money?”

“That I do not know. It cannot all be gone, for he is doing renovations to the houses. Whatever the state, though,” Richard grimaced, “something is not right in Mr. Briarhurst’s affairs.”

Chapter 20

“Mr. Briarhurst? What a surprise?” Eleanor stood from her lesson with Bea.

They were sitting together in the library, poring over books that discussed the history of festivals, such as Christmas, Halloween, and Saturnalia. It had been a surprise to Eleanor that morning to find Bea so interested in discovering such history, but she'd shown a ready fascination for it. They were deep in their books, sharing a spiced apple drink, when Mr. Briarhurst had been shown in by Garrison.

“How are you feeling after your cold?” Eleanor stood and moved toward Mr. Briarhurst, curtsying to him as he bowed.

“I am much recovered, thank you. I could not wait to see you again.” He clapped his hands together warmly. “Come, accompany me to the theatre this afternoon. They are holding a Christmas comedy, as it is the season. We have just an hour if you would like to change?” He checked his pocket watch.

Eleanor blinked, her mind working fast. It was a rather commanding way to be treated, and she did not wish to leave Bea behind. Besides, there was something more playing in the back of her mind. She now knew from Nathaniel that it was possible the man before her was a criminal. Even with her father's wish for her to be betrothed by Christmas, she had no wish to be

near Mr. Briarhurst at all at that moment.

Her father and Nathaniel left the house again this morning after their excursion yesterday evening. She had no idea where they had gone but knew well enough it had to do with this strange affair of Nathaniel's brother's will.

“Well, may Bea accompany us?” Eleanor gestured back to her sister.

With excitement, Bea stepped down from her chair and hurried forward.

“A Christmas comedy? I'd love that!” she said with delight, running to Eleanor's side.

“It is the season, is it not?” Eleanor asked, resting her hands on her sister's shoulders. Some theatre shows were not fond of children in the audience, but at Christmas, such rules were relaxed. She had a feeling she knew what Mr. Briarhurst's reaction would be, and it served in her interest. Knowing what she knew now, she had no wish to go with him at all, and at least his way, she could have an excuse not to.

Yet Mr. Briarhurst's expression had altered considerably. He stared down at Bea as if noticing for the first time that she was in the room at all. His nose curled a little.

It is as if she is a mouse beneath his boot.

“You’d like to come, wouldn’t you, Bea?” Eleanor said, to which Bea nodded again. “It would be a chance for you two to know one another better.”

She pushed the matter, waiting for him to turn her down. It was a test of his character, to see what he would do next. Although she couldn’t yet say for certain if he had forged the will or not, her suspicions were enough to make him doubt all aspects of his character.

Nathaniel spent hours at a time with Bea, playing pirates and laughing at her jests. He was her friend, and yet he wasn’t supposed to be as significant to this family as Mr. Briarhurst was. Why couldn’t Mr. Briarhurst make the effort with Bea that Nathaniel did?

“Please,” Eleanor added when she saw Mr. Briarhurst’s expression darkening further.

“I am afraid I cannot.” The darkness lifted and he forced a smile, though it didn’t reach his eyes. “I have only purchased two tickets for the event.”

Bea slipped from Eleanor’s hold. She returned to the table, pulling herself up

into the chair on her knees where she looked at her books once more.

“Ah, well, would there be a way to change the time of the performance?” Eleanor asked. “Could we go this evening instead, sir? I would be leaving my sister alone otherwise.”

“The staff are here to look after her.”

Eleanor stiffened. It was not the same. It was Christmas. She didn't want to leave her sister home alone, reading books. She should be part of the entertainment and the joy of the season. The fact that he'd turned her down gave Eleanor the excuse she needed not to go with him.

“I...” Eleanor's hands clasped together. She felt as if something snapped inside of her. It didn't seem to matter that she was courting this man, and the suspicion over his head regarding David's will was certainly prevalent in her mind, but what mattered most to Eleanor was his rudeness to Bea. It made it all too easy to turn him down.

“Come. There is not enough time for you to change now, I don't think.” He glanced down at her once more. “You will have to go as you are. Just wear a shawl so others in the audience cannot see your gown.”

“What's wrong with her gown?” Bea abruptly asked.

Mr. Briarhurst turned to face Bea, his eyes wide, shocked she had spoken at all.

“It’s fine, Bea.” Eleanor waved a hand in the air, hardly caring he had insulted what she was wearing when she had greater things to concern her.

“No, it’s not.” Bea sat upright on the chair. “What is wrong with my sister’s gown, sir?”

“You are speaking to me, child?” Mr. Briarhurst asked, his voice so firm that Eleanor stepped back from him in surprise. “No child should speak unless they are spoken to, and believe me, I made no effort to speak to you.”

I noticed. Eleanor’s gut tightened, her hands flattening at her sides. She wished nothing more than for Mr. Briarhurst to be far away from here.

Bea blushed a crimson shade of red that bled up to her forehead.

I will not put up with this. Not today.

“It is Christmas.” Eleanor kept her voice level. “More than ever, this is a time for family, and Bea is my family. She is my sister whom I love dearly. As such, with regret, I will not be able to come with you to the theatre today. I am staying with her.” She curtsied to Mr. Briarhurst, showing their conversation was at an end, and returned to the table.

“Eleanor?” Mr. Briarhurst spluttered in disbelief. “This cannot be. I have my carriage waiting now. I have braved coming through the snow to see you, to invite you to this show.”

“I am grateful, sir, but I will not be leaving my sister today.” Eleanor sat down in the chair beside her.

“You would rather spend time with this rat than me?”

Eleanor jerked her head up, shocked at his choice of words. Bea’s breath hitched beside her, the tears unmistakably mere seconds away.

“This will not stand, Eleanor.” Mr. Briarhurst warned, his finger raised in the air. “When you and I are wed, it will not stand.”

He didn’t give her a chance to reply. He marched back out of the room and must have bustled past Garrison in the corridor, for there was a yelp of

surprise of the two colliding.

Bea burst into tears. Eleanor swept her sister up into her arms, embracing her tightly, just as Garrison's head appeared around the doorway of the library.

“Garrison—oh.” Eleanor broke off as they heard the door slam in the distant regions of the house. “Good, he is gone. Would you bring some Christmas cake or mince pies for my sister, please? The kitchen must have something good to tempt her.”

“Of course.” Garrison offered a smile and hurried off again.

“There now, Bea.” Eleanor leaned back from her sister and swept Bea's hair out of her eyes. Retrieving a handkerchief from a drawer in the desk, she dried the tears that now streaked her sister's ruddy cheeks. “Ignore him. Ignore what he said.”

“How can I?” Bea asked, stammering through her tears. “Y-you're going to marry him!”

Eleanor felt sick as Bea fell back on her shoulder. She could no longer make an effort to stem her sister's tears; she just held her, swaying her back and forth.

I do not wish to marry him. I cannot bear the thought!

“Shh, love. You will not lose me. You will never lose me,” she whispered in Bea’s ear, holding her tight as she closed her eyes. In her mind’s eye, Eleanor saw herself walking down the aisle again. This time, she saw Mr. Briarhurst awaiting her, but as she took his hand and turned to look at the pews, there was another who sat in the front row, beside Bea and the father. It was Nathaniel, and he held her gaze, looking as sick as she felt.

“He will take you away,” Bea muttered. “He will n-not let you see m-me again.”

“That’s nonsense.” Eleanor lifted her sister’s head. “Now, you listen to me, Bea. No matter who I marry, no matter what our future, no one will ever keep us apart. You hear me? We’re family. That’s the most important thing there is.”

Bea’s tears continued as she hugged Eleanor once more. Eleanor patted her back, swaying her from side to side, as the tears stained the shoulder of her gown. Despite her promise to Bea, Eleanor’s fears were growing by the second.

Mr. Briarhurst had actually called Bea a rat, as if she wasn’t human at all but a pest. Something he wished wasn’t a part of his life.

I cannot marry him. How could Bea and I ever be happy if I did?

“What’s that?” Nathaniel asked as he strode into the house with Richard behind him. In his grasp, he had the gloves he had purchased Eleanor for Christmas, tucked away into a box.

Richard halted in the middle of the hallway, his expression changing at once.

There were great gasping cries from somewhere.

“It’s Bea. She’s crying.” Richard dropped his top hat to the floor and ran through the house. Garrison hurried in and picked up the hat, kindly trying to wipe off the snow.

Nathaniel stared after Richard, admiring the way the father had run to his daughter’s aid at once when he realized she was the one crying.

“What has happened, Garrison?” Nathaniel asked, his voice quiet as he too took off his frock coat and hat.

“Oh, it is grave, Your Grace. Grave indeed.” Garrison’s jowls trembled as he shook his head. “Mr. Briarhurst called on Lady Eleanor, asking her to the theatre this afternoon. She asked to take Lady Beatrice too, and he refused, calling her... calling her a...”

Garrison turned away and hung the coats on a peg nearby.

“I am sure I have heard worse in my life,” Nathaniel assured him. “Please, what happened?”

“He called Lady Beatrice... a rat.” Garrison was horrified, his whole body shaking all over. “Lady Eleanor refused to go with him, and he stormed out of the house. Poor Lady Beatrice has not stopped crying since. I brought her mince pies, but they have done little to help.”

In the distant part of the house, Bea’s crying suddenly grew louder. It was as if her heart was breaking for everyone to hear.

“Thank you, Garrison.” Nathaniel reached into the pocket of his coat. “I have something that I think could help. An early Christmas present.” He tapped the box that the present was in. “Would you be so kind as to put this other box in my room? It is a gift for Lady Eleanor, and I do not want her to get wind of it.”

“Of course, Your Grace.” Garrison smiled warmly and took the gloves, hurrying up the stairs.

Nathaniel tapped the box containing Bea’s gift in his hands as he walked through the house, slowly approaching the library. He wished to help, to comfort Bea, but he wasn’t connected by blood. He wasn’t her true family, so he was wary of invading on a private moment.

He peered through the open doorway of the library, looking in to see Eleanor sitting beside a table. She looked as if she had been frozen to ice and stared forward, her face a picture of pain. Beside her was Richard, with Bea in his lap. He was talking softly to her, trying to cheer her up.

“You need not pay attention to such things,” Richard assured her, his voice gentle. “Many people say things in high spirits that they later regret.”

Eleanor looked sharply away, though fortunately, her sister did not see the expression. Nathaniel did, though—it said quite plainly to him that Eleanor did not expect Mr. Briarhurst to apologize at any point for what he had said.

She cannot marry him.

Whatever feeling Nathaniel had had about this before, the lingering doubts these last few days, became a certainty at this moment. Eleanor had too good of heart to be forever bound to a man who would be so cruel to Bea, and may even be a criminal, stealing another man's inheritance.

Nathaniel knew what he felt for her. It was inevitable, really. He was not just a family friend but growing more and more devoted to her. He couldn't bear the thought that, of all people, Eleanor would marry Briarhurst.

Nathaniel caught her gaze. Eleanor looked at him, wide-eyed to see him hiding in the doorway. She beckoned him inside.

"He's not very nice, is he?" Bea said miserably, her tears beginning to slow.

"No." Richard sighed, clearly disappointed to accept it was the truth, though he had no choice now. "I fear he is not very nice at all sometimes."

Eleanor stood as Nathaniel reached her side. They reached toward one another on impulse, holding hands.

"Are you well?" Nathaniel asked, desperate to know.

“I’m fine,” she said quietly.

She’s lying. He could read it so easily. There was a tremble in her face, a twitch that she was trying to hide. He felt it through their touch, too, and he grimaced, showing her that he could read her and understood.

“I am not important now,” she pleaded softly, so only he could hear her. “It’s Bea I’m worried for.”

“Trust me.” He winked at her and patted the small box in his other hand. “Bea?” he called to her.

She turned on her father’s lap, struggling to dry her tears with her sister’s handkerchief.

“Now, whatever has happened here today, I’d say it’s not worth you thinking about it any more. In fact, I have something to make you smile, if you wish to open it now.”

He laid the box down on the desk in front of her.

“What is it?” she asked, drying the last of her tears.

“Consider it an early Christmas present.”

“Another?” Eleanor hissed, taking his arm. “You have already been so generous!”

“It is worth it,” he whispered to her, nodding in Bea’s direction. “Believe me.”

Eleanor smiled softly, releasing his arm. For that smile, he would buy a thousand gifts.

“Go on,” Richard urged his daughter. “Open it.”

Bea reached forward, lowering the scrunched-up handkerchief to the table. Slowly, she lifted the lid of the box and peered inside.

Nathaniel kept his gaze on Bea’s face, wanting to be certain that she liked it. Inside was a small bookmark shaped like a pirate’s sword, the metal handle inlaid with gold.

“Oh!” Bea jumped down off her father’s lap, gazing at the bookmark as she held it high in the air. “It is beautiful!”

“How much have you spent on us?” Eleanor asked in panic beside him.

“It doesn’t matter,” he whispered, meaning the words. To see Bea go from utter sadness to happiness was everything.

“En guard!” Bea cried and thrust the bookmark toward her father. He laughed and leaned back.

“I hope I get one for Christmas now,” he called to Nathaniel. “Or how am I supposed to fight back?”

Bea prodded her father in the stomach and he yelped, jumping out of the chair. What proceeded was a mad chase around the library, with Richard running slowly enough that his daughter could keep up with him, prodding him in the back with the sword-shaped bookmark. He had clearly recovered from his sore ankle well, though he limped a little as he ran.

“I love it. I love it!” Bea’s cries made Nathaniel’s and Eleanor’s laughter fade as she came toward him. Bea wrapped her arms around Nathaniel’s waist and embraced him.

For a moment, stunned, Nathaniel just stood there. Then he laid a hand on Bea's shoulder and embraced her, too.

"Thank you," she said softly.

"You are most welcome. Now, I'd say your father is in need of a weapon."

At these words, Bea ran toward her father again.

"Nathaniel, I'll get you for this!" Richard called, running back out of the library as laughter followed him.

Nathaniel turned to face Eleanor, who was struggling to stifle her own giggles, holding a hand over her mouth.

"How did you do that?" she managed to get out. "You knew just the thing that would make her smile."

"I think I know one of the reasons you two like the idea of adventure so

much,” he whispered softly. “It’s the same reason you wish to explore and Bea wishes to play with swords. You long for control.”

Eleanor’s eyes widened, but she said nothing. The fact she didn’t argue gave him hope that he could be onto something.

“I’d say all of us long for it in this world. Hopefully, that tiny sword,” he nodded in the direction that Bea had retreated, “will make her feel in control again. At the very least, it gives her something else to think of other than Mr. Briarhurst’s horrible words.”

“She loves it,” Eleanor said. “Thank you. Thank you so much for your kindness to her. You’re always so kind to her. That is a rare thing, clearly!”

“It shouldn’t be rare.”

“But it is!” Eleanor declared, getting worked up herself now. She blinked madly and Nathaniel saw that she, too, was now holding back tears. She looked away, moving her hands to her hips, but Nathaniel caught one of her hands and held it between his, patting it comfortingly as she fought those tears.

“He’s gone. He’s not here now.”

“What he said.” She shook her head. “He disgusts me.”

“I know. He disgusts us all.”

That is why you cannot marry him.

The words were on the tip of his tongue. Nathaniel longed to shout them at her, to demand that she and her father give up this ridiculous idea at once of finding comfort by seeing her married to Mr. Briarhurst.

It is not my place. I cannot say anything.

Instead, he chose other words entirely.

“It is strange. When Bea hugged me, I was reminded of something just now.”

“What’s that?” Eleanor asked, turning to face him once more.

“I remembered what it was like to have a family.”

Eleanor’s eyes glistened with unshed tears as she smiled and her hand curled through his, softening in his grasp. His head thudded hard against his ribcage at the firm touch and how much he loved it.

I feel a part of this family now.

Chapter 21

“Well?” Nathaniel no longer cared if he sounded impatient and rude. He would apologize for his behavior later, but for now, his anger and frustration had gotten to him, his temper beyond his control. He stood in the corridor of the solicitor’s office, his hessian boots and half his trousers sodden thanks to trekking through the snow in Covent Garden to get here.

Snow had also slipped down the back collar of his frock coat and his whole body felt like ice, though it was not his temperature that was upsetting him.

It was so close to Christmas Day now, so close to the day he was supposed to be delighted, celebrating with Eleanor and her family. Yet such a day felt completely distant to him. Before he could permit himself any such enjoyment, he had to know the truth of Mr. Briarhurst, and not just for his own sake.

For Eleanor’s.

If Richard was serious about seeing her betrothed by Christmas Day, then Eleanor could soon be beyond Nathaniel’s reach and engaged to a man who had forged a will and conned another out of his inheritance. Eleanor should know who she was marrying, and for her sake as much as his own, he was now here.

“Mr. Thackery?” he called once more to the solicitor who stood in the doorway of his office, clutching to something long and thin in his hands. “Have you found the two wills from storage?”

“I have.” He took a step back into the office and curled his hand, beckoning Nathaniel to follow. “There is something you should see, Your Grace.” He stepped back into the room, disappearing from view.

Nathaniel hurried to follow.

Despite the fact it was daytime, two candles had been lit and placed on the desk, trying to compete with the gray light that shone through the windows. With the snow coming down so thickly, there was little light outside this early in the morning.

Mr. Thackery calmly placed the two wills down on the desk, unfurling them so they were laid out before him. Nathaniel rounded the desk to stand beside Mr. Thackery, peering at the documents.

“Here is the original will.” Mr. Thackery pointed to the one written years ago. Nathaniel glanced briefly at the bequests and to his astonishment, in the old will, the estates were still left to him. He blinked, startled, expecting that his brother had requested to write a new will in order to reinstate him.

Nathaniel's eyes darted down the page and saw there were other bequests, and wondered if this was what David had wanted to change.

There were smaller bequests to their mother, who, of course, was no longer living, and a bequest of a few fine paintings to Mr. Briarhurst.

Nathaniel's gaze dropped to the bottom of the page, where he saw David's signature alongside two witnesses. David's signature was firm and unmistakable, even flamboyant in the way the D curled across the page.

"And?" Nathaniel lifted his chin. "Compared to the other."

Mr. Thackery sighed, looking very ill at ease indeed as he slid the other will toward Nathaniel. Down at the bottom of the page was David's signature, but not as it should have been. It was an intimation of it, with the flamboyant curl of the D in the wrong place and a shakiness to the rest of the name.

"It is not his." Nathaniel sharply stood straight. "How could you miss that?"

"I paid it no great heed." Mr. Thackery shook his head, helplessly. "If I did, I must have presumed as he was ill, that of course his signature would look different."

“I have it on excellent authority from his doctor that he would not have been able to lift a quill on his last day alive. He couldn’t have managed *this*.” Nathaniel thrust a finger down to the page. He was desperate to say the words, to the utter accusation he so long to hear aloud.

It was Briarhurst. He did this, to get the money.

“The man who benefitted from this will—”

“You need proof.” Mr. Thackery cut Nathaniel off before he could say any more.

“What? You think this is not enough proof?” Nathaniel asked in disbelief. “This is a fake will. It leaves everything to Mr. Briarhurst, not a single small bequest to anyone else. Who else could have had the motivation to do this?”

“Courts of law are funny things.” Mr. Thackery seemed tired as he sat back in a chair nearby, rubbing his temples. Behind him on another table, there were still the signs of Christmas celebration, with discarded plates for Christmas cake and empty glasses of punch that had been used the night before.

The thought that Mr. Thackery could have been celebrating when Nathaniel

was so sick with worry merely made things worse. “They are like spiders’ webs. They stretch and encapsulate all within them, but they have a funny habit. They catch flies and let hornets go free.”

Nathaniel stepped back, that sick feeling growing worse and worse.

“If you want me to stand up in court and challenge it for you, then you need to be able to prove it so there is no element of doubt whatsoever,” Mr. Thackery urged with quiet passion as he spoke. “Find someone who was there when this was forged, and we have a witness who can declare it openly.”

Nathaniel veered forward, his eyes darting back to the bottom of the page to search for the witnesses. The names that were listed as witnesses made his jaw fall slack.

Mr. and Mrs. Trevor Reeves.

“That’s not possible,” Nathaniel murmured, his breath catching in his throat as he saw that someone else had written out their names and they had merely given their marks to it, placing crosses in the relevant boxes, for neither of them could write.

“Well? Do you know who the witnesses are?” Mr. Thackery asked restlessly.

“I do.”

Nathaniel practically threw himself off the horse when he reached the tenants' houses. It was only thanks to the snow he'd managed to make it this far into the Margrave lands without being challenged, for today, he had no permission from Briarhurst to be here, but no groundskeeper was working in this weather.

Muttering and cursing the sheer extent of the snow, Nathaniel kicked the sods away and left the horse, moving toward the door of the cottage. Behind him, the horse whinnied in objection against the cold.

Nathaniel halted and moved back, shrugging off his frock coat and throwing it over the back of the horse. He patted the horse's nose in apology for driving him so long and hard through the snow. Slowly, the horse grunted, as if thanking him for the kindness of the coat.

Nathaniel returned to the door and knocked lightly. The cold was settling into his bones, and he knocked again, harder this time.

The door was flung open a second later.

“Nathaniel?” Trevor’s face appeared on the other side. “Good God, man, what are you doing out riding in this weather? Where’s your coat?” He reached for Nathaniel’s shoulder and dragged him into the house, glancing behind him. “Madman. Only you would give your coat to a horse.”

“He was cold.”

“So are you!” Trevor pointed out.

Within a minute, Nathaniel was hustled into the corner of their kitchen and made to sit by the open fire with a blanket around his shoulders. Trevor made him a tea as Miriam stood nearby, cradling their baby. She thanked him for the money he’d left for the child, but he brushed it off. It was the barest thing he could have done, and he was already planning on sending them a better gift for Christmas Day, perhaps a new cot.

“Why have you come here today?” Trevor asked, thrusting the cup into Nathaniel’s hands and sitting down in a chair on the other side of the fire. “I hope it was not to wish us a merry Christmas, not in this weather. You could have done that in a letter.”

Nathaniel burnt his tongue on the tea, but he didn't care. His mind was on other things. "I have something delicate to ask you," he explained, wincing against the pain in his tongue. "But I ask you for the right reasons."

Trevor exchanged an odd glance with his wife before nodding at Nathaniel, urging him to go on.

"Have you signed something recently? Put a cross to any sort of paperwork? Perhaps at the request of my brother?" Nathaniel looked up from the teacup, staring straight at Trevor.

A frown instantly appeared.

"No." He shook his head. "Not for your brother."

"Then... for who?" Nathaniel waited with bated breath. "And when? This is important, Trevor. More important than I can possibly say."

"It was months ago now. He came to the door, didn't he, Miriam?"

She nodded in agreement, shifting the child in her arms.

“He said it was important to have witnesses’ signatures. Didn’t need us to be able to write. He wrote down our names, and then we put crosses.”

“I have seen those crosses.” Nathaniel nodded. “Trevor, do you have any idea what you signed? Any idea at all?”

Trevor paused for a beat, then shook his head.

“I can’t read,” he reminded Nathaniel. “He just said it was an important paper, and he was sorry to ask, but as we were nearby, he thought us the best option.”

Nathaniel sat back, in danger of dropping his tea as he wracked his brains. He knew why Briarhurst had come here. With Trevor and Miriam only able to put a mark to their names, they would not read the paper, they would be unable to see it was a forged will, whereas any member of staff up at the house who could read a little at least would have been able to recognize it for what it was.

“Who?” Nathaniel said in a deep tone, recognizing that Trevor hadn’t yet said the name of the man who had come to the door. “Trevor, tell me who it was that pleaded for you to sign that paper?”

“It was Mr. Henry Briarhurst, the friend of your brother. The one who... you know, inherited it all. Not that I am pleased with what happened,” Trevor reminded him. “Believe me, the state of the farms now does us no favors at all.” He glanced at Miriam, who was already nodding in agreement. “But yes, it was him.”

Nathaniel put down the cup beside him on the hearth, leaning forward as he rested his elbows on his knees. He had his proof. It was all he needed, for someone to connect Henry Briarhurst to that will. It proved that David had not written it after all, and for the witnesses’ signatures to be valid, they would have had to see David sign the will—which they had not.

“Was it the day he died?” Nathaniel asked, his voice low. “Was it the day my brother died?”

Trevor screwed up his face, thinking for a minute, then nodded.

“Either that day or the day before, but yes. It was around that time.”

Nathaniel could have punched the air with something akin to delight and relief, though a simmering anger still pumped in his veins.

Briarhurst has escaped with his winnings for too long. This will not continue.

He stood and reached for Trevor's hand to shake. "Thank you, Trevor. Thank you so much. I have one more question for you both. If I asked you to stand in a court of law, to declare what you have seen, would you do it?"

Trevor frowned, then a look of understanding dawned across his face. Without Nathaniel having to explain it was a will, Trevor made the leap. He abruptly nodded, shaking Nathaniel's hand, too.

"I would do it without hesitation."

"Bea? Bea? Please calm yourself. You'll do yourself an injury." Eleanor tried to catch her sister's shoulders as Bea danced relentlessly around the entrance hall.

"Please, please, please, can I go?" Bea asked the same question she had now uttered so many times on the night of a ball. "I'll behave."

"I'm sure you would." Eleanor smiled at the idea, rather suspecting that Bea was likely to storm the dance floor and demand a dance partner, or drag

Nathaniel there ahead of time, insisting he danced with her.

Eleanor looked around, thinking of Nathaniel. It was strange for him to be late for a ball.

“You shouldn’t look for him so obviously, you know.” Bea stopped spinning but, still very dizzy, wobbled on her feet.

“I beg your pardon?” Eleanor looked around, pretending innocence, to which Bea wrinkled her nose.

“You look for him all the time. You shouldn’t look so in love, Eleanor—”

“Bea! That is not what I am.” Eleanor walked away from her sister to the mirror over the hall table and checked her appearance. She was wearing the new gown he had gifted to her, for it was quite her favorite. She adjusted the neckline and the loose curls that hung from her updo. She couldn’t help wondering if Nathaniel would like the way she looked.

“Then... who are you fussing with your appearance for? Surely not Mr. Briarhurst.”

“Enough, Bea.”

“All I’m saying is that—”

“Bea.” Eleanor flicked her eyes to look warningly at her sister in the reflection.

She just shrugged with innocence. “Christmas is a time for love, you know?” Bea reminded her, that mischievous smile back in place. “You should tell him.”

“I am not having this conversation.” Eleanor felt quite sick as she held her hands up in the air. It was as if Bea had seen straight into her heart, pinning her with these throwaway words.

I cannot tell him. I am courting another!

There was always the possibility that Nathaniel would return to America after Christmas. What would happen to her heart then? Would it go with him? Leaving her hollow and empty without him here?”

“You should tell him,” Bea insisted once again. “You said Christmas is a

time for love. You always have done. To be with those you love. So, you should tell him.”

“Stop being mischievous,” Eleanor warned, turning away from her reflection. “Nathaniel and I... we have a healthy respect for one another, a deep admiration, perhaps, and we are good friends. It is no more than that.”

Bea held up a hand and pointed at Eleanor’s face.

“What?” Eleanor asked, brushing her sister’s hand away.

“You have blushed to the color of a tomato as you have said such a thing.” She sighed heavily and turned away, dancing back across the room. “Never have I been more convinced you are in love with him. Let’s tell him tonight.”

“Bea!” Eleanor hissed and crossed the room, intent on making her sister be quiet at once.

“Nathaniel? Nathaniel!” Bea called relentlessly up the stairs. No amount of waving at her sister and pleading for her to be quiet could silence Bea now.

“Goodness, what is all this racket?” Richard appeared at the top of the stairs,

stifling a yawn as he struggled with his cravat, walking down the stairs. “Bea? Why are you shouting the whole house down?”

“I’m calling to Nathaniel. I have something to tell him.” Her eyes twinkled with mischief as she looked at Eleanor.

“No, you don’t,” Eleanor insisted. “Now, go to bed.” She urged Bea onto the stairs, past their father.

Bea parted her lips, clearly ready to shout Nathaniel’s name again, but Richard’s hand on her shoulder as he reached the bottom step halted her.

“Do not waste your breath,” Richard said slowly. “Nathaniel is not here this evening. He is out on business.”

“On business?” Eleanor repeated before Bea could say anything. “But... he was to accompany us to the ball tonight.”

“He was. He has sent his regrets, but things have had to change.” Richard released Bea. He whispered goodnight to her and Bea headed up the stairs, looking much more miserable than she had done a mere minute ago.

Eleanor looked away, feeling a knot tighten in her stomach. She realized just how much she had come to depend on Nathaniel being at each of the balls she attended. She had been looking forward to entering on his arm, to escaping Mr. Briarhurst's company briefly into his, to spend any extra time with him at all, even to look longingly at him across the ballroom.

What is wrong with me? Dear God, what if Bea is right? What if I am incapable of holding back my heart?

Eleanor stepped away from her father. Nervous that he would see on her face how she felt, she moved to the mirror and checked her reflection once more, picking up her pelisse and wrapping it around her shoulders.

"He does send his regrets, Eleanor."

"I understand." She avoided looking at her father in the mirror. "Shall we depart?" she asked, taking control of her emotions that felt like a whirring gale inside of her. "If we are to make it through this snow, we'll need the extra time to get there." She turned and took her father's arm, all too aware that he seemed to be looking at her rather intently.

"You shall see him tomorrow morning."

"I know." Eleanor forced a smile, frustration not for all her attempt at acting,

pretending to be fine with this news, even her father could see straight through it. “Let us go, Father. We do not need to trouble Nathaniel with his business.”

As they walked out, she felt Richard tap her arm. It was a comforting touch, one she suspected he did so he didn't have to utter another word about Nathaniel again.

Chapter 22

“Mr. Thackery? Mr. Thackery?” Nathaniel called the solicitor’s name as he marched up the stairs of the man’s office, hurrying to the main room. He opened the door without hesitation, finding the room flooded with candlelight at this time of night. His eyes took a few seconds to adjust to that lemony light, in which he saw that Mr. Thackery was not the only man in the room.

Standing beside the desk was another, a man whom Nathaniel had seen just once before.

“Mr. Warren?” Nathaniel muttered in surprise, staring at the accountant. He stood stiffly beside Mr. Thackery’s desk, scarcely moving a muscle.

In contrast, Mr. Thackery swayed in his seat. This evening, he had plainly taken to drinking, though the glass of claret in his hands Nathaniel was unsure he had taken because it was Christmas or because of the stress of realizing he had executed a forged will.

“What is going on?” Nathaniel asked, stepping into the room.

Mr. Thackery waved to Nathaniel to come further in. He hiccupped and then

gestured to Mr. Warren.

“We have been having a little chat about the Margrave estates. All of them, as well as the investments and anything to do with money.” He sighed deeply, fidgeting with the glass in his grasp.

By contrast, Mr. Warren was very still. He bowed in greeting to Nathaniel after a minute of the two of them just staring at one another.

“Mr. Thackery, I have the proof we needed.” Nathaniel took a chair and leaned forward, pinning the solicitor with his gaze. Mr. Thackery hiccupped again and raised the claret to his lips, his despair plain. “I have spoken to the witnesses this afternoon. They have confirmed that it was Mr. Briarhurst who brought the will to them to sign. They never saw my brother sign or write anything. This is proof, is it not? The proof we needed. The will is forged.”

Nathaniel sat back in victory, holding his arms out in triumph, but Mr. Thackery hiccupped again, his expression turning graver than before, and Mr. Warren shook his head. The mood in the room took a dark turn.

“What is it?” Nathaniel asked, his hands lowering down to his lap. “What is it I do not know?”

Mr. Thackery gestured to Mr. Warren, urging him to speak with the glass in

his grasp.

“Your Grace.” Mr. Warren took out another chair and sat down calmly. “You came to me the other day because you wished to ascertain what troubles there were in your family’s old estates, and if Mr. Briarhurst’s affairs were in order.”

“I did. You intimated there was some trouble, though you refused to say anymore.”

“That I did.” Mr. Warren nodded and looked at Mr. Thackery, who shrugged.

“Why do you worry about client confidentiality now?” Mr. Thackery asked. “*He* should have been your client all along. *He* should have inherited the estate.” He thrust a finger at Nathaniel. “You owe Mr. Briarhurst nothing.”

Mr. Warren nodded. For the first time, his calm façade slipped. He scratched the back of his neck, looking quite ill at ease as he shook his head.

“When I intimated there was some trouble in the affairs, Your Grace, it is an understatement.” Mr. Warren’s level gaze met Nathaniel’s. “There is nothing left.”

Nathaniel's eyes narrowed, certain for a minute that he had heard the accountant wrong. It wasn't possible.

“What do you mean *nothing*?” Nathaniel repeated, stressing the word. “Mr. Briarhurst inherited a vast fortune indeed. My brother had a substantial amount of money, not to mention the two country estates and the townhouse. They are not gone, are they? They are still in his name.”

Mr. Warren shifted in his seat.

“One of the country estates was sold this week in order to raise money, the one in the north.”

Mr. Warren's words left Nathaniel's mouth hanging open. It was so far away, he wouldn't have heard of the sale, especially if it was a private affair with a quiet buyer. Even gossip in the local villages wouldn't have reached this far to London.

“Tell me everything,” Nathaniel pleaded.

Any secrecy Mr. Warren might have pertained to before was now abandoned. In detail, Mr. Warren described everything, how Mr. Briarhurst had had not a penny to his name before he had inherited the Margrave estates, and how it

was even worse than that. He had great debts, and with threats of debtors' prison, Mr. Warren now feared this was the motivation for Mr. Briarhurst to get hold of the Margrave fortune.

Since then, Briarhurst had tried to pay off his debts with the money he had inherited. Yet he was no good businessman. The money he had placed into investments had been poorly allocated, and he had lost even more money.

He had also foolishly plunged great pools of money into the country estates to have them renovated, and when the bill grew larger due to problems found in the building work, he'd refused to pay. There were tales of gambling in gentlemen's clubs, bills left unpaid, and Mr. Warren, the accountant, was left fending off pleas from debtors that came in practically every week.

"Is there a single bean left? Anything at all?" Nathaniel asked. His body was numb as he sat back in his chair, holding onto his stomach.

Never did he think it would come to this. Running around like a madman these last few days, he thought he had been fighting for his brother's last request, for his brother's wishes. To hear that all of it was for nothing, that David's wishes could now never be enacted, made bile rise in his throat.

He closed his eyes and thought of poor David being laid to rest in his grave. Without Nathaniel there to pay his respects, it would have been Briarhurst standing beside him, crowing over him in death.

“He was supposed to be his friend,” Nathaniel muttered quietly before Mr. Warren could answer. “Forgive me, you were saying?” He waved at Mr. Warren, urging him on.

“There is nothing left.” Mr. Warren shook his head. “It is my understanding from Mr. Briarhurst that he hoped to marry in order to regain his fortune and pay off his debts.”

Nathaniel blinked, his hands balling into fists in his lap so tightly that his nails dug into the palms of his hands.

Eleanor.

She was part of this. She was a part of his plan.

If Briarhurst had paid attention to her and her father for one minute, he would have known that they had no money to their name. Yet he had not. He must have believed that because her father was titled that she did indeed have a dowry, though of course, Nathaniel knew she had none at all.

He intends to marry her not for affection of any kind, but to use her money.

“I have to get her away from him,” Nathaniel muttered quietly.

“I beg your pardon?” Mr. Warren asked, clearly puzzled by what he had said.

“It does not matter.” Nathaniel shook his head and stood. He couldn’t stay here anymore, not in this room, maybe not even in London as he turned on the spot, pacing relentlessly. “So…” He looked at Mr. Thackery, waiting for the solicitor to put his glass down on the desk and shift his full attention to Nathaniel. “You are telling me it is pointless to challenge the will?”

“You would receive nothing by it,” Mr. Thackery insisted. “All you might get is debts to your name. There is nothing more I can do, and I urge you to abandon your endeavor, Your Grace. This mess, this tangled web, it cannot be undone cleanly now.”

Nathaniel stood back, feeling strangely close to tears, though he fought against it. While it was wrong to let Mr. Briarhurst win in this way, Nathaniel knew how the world worked. It was not so easy to undo things like this, especially when the law and money were involved.

“I am sorry,” Mr. Thackery said, his voice quite meek.

“As am I.” Nathaniel sighed. “I should have returned sooner. God damn it, it is my own fault. I should have returned this last year and come to see David myself. Maybe none of this would have ever happened.” The guilt rose within him, making that sick feeling even worse than before. “Goodnight to you both, gentlemen. I would wish you both a merry Christmas, if I could.”

“Goodnight, Your Grace,” Mr. Thackery said miserably.

Mr. Warren stood and bowed again in parting. He looked as if he wanted to say something more, but Nathaniel couldn't bear to hear it. He backed out of the office and disappeared down the stairs.

“Please, Father, let us go home.” Eleanor clung to Richard's arm, looking around the ballroom in frustration. She had escaped Mr. Briarhurst momentarily, but who knew how long it would last? He had kept appearing at her side that night like an attentive pup, but nothing so submissive.

“Are you not enjoying yourself, dear?” her father asked, shifting his attention from the conversation he had been having. The man he had been speaking with walked off to talk with another.

“I regret, I am not,” she said simply. They stood in the corner of the

ballroom, half-hidden by a table stacked high with crystal glasses. Around the glasses were sprigs of holly, the red berries shining in the candlelight.

Eleanor's gaze dwelled on that holly, feeling the evening could be summarized completely by them. Yes, it might be beautiful here, beautiful like those berries, but she had enjoyed it as much as she would enjoy being pricked by their pointed leaves.

"Ah, Eleanor." Her father took her hand between both of his and patted it comfortingly. "You used to enjoy these events. Just because Nathaniel is not here tonight..."

"It is not just that," Eleanor said hurriedly. "I... I need a break from Mr. Briarhurst."

Her father looked around, sighing once again, as if warily watching for the man they discussed.

"It is not good to speak of a man you are courting in this manner."

"If you mean—"

“Do not misunderstand me,” Richard pleaded. “I simply mean that as much as I wish to see you comfortable in life, I also wish to see you happy.” He sighed and shook his head. For a moment of hope, Eleanor wondered if her father was having second thoughts about whether Mr. Briarhurst was a good match for her or not. “Come, let us take you home. He has rather paraded you around tonight as if you were a fine ornament on your arm.”

“Thank you.” Eleanor threaded her arm back through her father’s and they moved to the door. Continuously, she glanced back, wary of being followed by Mr. Briarhurst.

Her friend Sophie caught her eye from a distance and, clearly understanding she was trying to make an escape, placed herself in front of Mr. Briarhurst, who was attempting to cross the room toward Eleanor. Sophie quite elaborately dropped a bracelet and Mr. Briarhurst was forced to bend down and retrieve it.

Eleanor mouthed her thanks across the room as Sophie urged her on with a wave.

Outside of the house, Eleanor climbed quickly into the carriage. Snow was starting to fall again, and judging by how little the last snowfall was melting, it would be a difficult ride home. She sat beside her father in the cold, with not a word uttered between them. They leaned against one another, with her head on his shoulder, in danger of falling asleep, as the lantern overhead swung from the ceiling, back and forth.

When the carriage did eventually reach their house, it was struggling through the snow. Richard stepped down onto the drive first and took her hand, helping her down, too. They trudged through the snow together as Richard called to the footman and driver, urging them to be quick and to warm themselves in their beds, for he worried about them falling ill.

Inside the house, Eleanor lit two candles and proffered one to her father, who sighed, looking down into that flame as if it boded a great ill.

“What is wrong, Father?” she asked, her voice soft. “Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. You are usually so happy at this time of year.”

“Usually.” He looked up from that flame, the yellow light flickering in his eyes. “Oh, I wish I could be happy this year. You do not like him very much, do you?”

The sudden question startled her. She hardly needed to ask who they were talking about.

“No, I didn’t think so,” Richard murmured more to himself.

“Perhaps it’s time we got some sleep, Father.”

“Soon, soon,” he said distractedly. “I just wish to check on some manner of business in my study. I shall retire for the night soon.”

“Business? At this time of night?” She stepped forward, about to cut him off and stop him from going to his study. “This is hardly the time. Can it not wait until the morning?”

“I just wish to check something. I’ll sleep soon. Goodnight, dear.” He moved to her side and kissed her temple, tapping her shoulder in comfort. He walked away down the hallway, taking his candle with him.

Eleanor stared after him, gripping her own candle in surprise. The light was feeble around her now, and she was strangely aware of the darkness. For Christmas, the air should have been comfortable, full of happiness and ease, but it was not how she felt. She merely felt tense and very alone.

Sighing, she reached for the stairs and walked up, intent on retiring to her own chamber. In the corridor, she ambled slowly along. When she reached her bedchamber, she lifted a hand to the door handle, only to halt when she heard a sound further down the corridor.

Something clunked heavily, then something thudded afterward. Someone cursed, and then the thudding resumed.

Nathaniel?

Eleanor abandoned the door of her chamber and turned away, hurrying down the corridor and following the sounds. She had to turn two corners, heading to a distant bedchamber in the house before she found the source of the noise. Nathaniel's bedchamber door was fully open. Inside, three candles were lit, their flames fully bathing the room and revealing what he was doing.

He was packing, throwing things into his trunks and portmanteaus.

Eleanor hardly cared if it was inappropriate to be in a man's chamber. Her shock had rendered her unable to think of propriety. She pushed the door open wider, staring at him in amazement. The creaking of the door alerted him to her presence without her having to say anything.

He halted in his packing and turned to face her. He'd lost his frock coat, and with his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows, he bore a flushed face. Evidently, he'd worked up a sweat in packing so quickly.

"You are leaving?" she whispered in shock, her face contorting into an expression of pain. "You said you would stay for Christmas."

“I must go, Eleanor. I cannot stay here anymore.” He tossed a tailcoat into a portmanteau and turned to his vanity table, collecting a toilette box and stuffing various small bottles and vials inside it.

“What are you talking about?” Eleanor walked further into the room. She had to clamber over two of the trunks to get near him. “You said you would stay. Now what? You intend to sneak off in the middle of the night in this weather? To abandon us without saying goodbye?”

His eyes glanced at hers, guiltily.

“You cannot run from us in this way,” Eleanor pleaded. “Nathaniel, what on earth is happening?”

He released his toilette box and turned to face her, with his body quite restless. He ran his hands through his hair, his usually wild dark hair even more mad.

“I have discovered the truth, Eleanor. All of it.” His eyes wouldn’t settle but darted around the room. “It’s true. David did indeed wish to leave me the estate.”

“He did?” She stepped forward. “Is that not more reason to stay? *This...*” She gestured around the room. “Do not tell me you are packing to take a ship

back to America? Surely you are not leaving the country?”

He nodded.

The silent answer left her tottering on her feet. She stepped back, colliding with one of his portmanteaus and managing to fall down upon it.

He is leaving?

Eleanor realized at once just how right Bea had been earlier that evening when she had accused Eleanor of being in love. Nothing else could explain her heart breaking into pieces as it was doing now, just at the thought of Nathaniel leaving and returning to America.

“Why?” she whispered, her voice quiet.

He sat down on another portmanteau, facing her, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees.

“Because I have discovered this evening that there is nothing left to fight for,” he spoke in a rush. “Mr. Briarhurst does not have a shilling to his name. He was in debt, and that is why he forged a will to get my family’s fortune.

He has now spent all of that too.” His voice broke and he paused for a moment before going on. “There is nothing for me to fight for, Eleanor. Nothing for me to stay for anymore.”

Chapter 23

“Nothing?”

Nathaniel stared at Eleanor, feeling as if he had kicked himself in the gut with his own words. There was one person here to stay for, one person to fight for, but she was out of reach. Currently, she was courting Briarhurst.

Nathaniel moved off the portmanteau, holding her gaze as he dropped to a knee in front of her, so they were closer together. Her lips parted and she blinked madly. For a minute, he thought she was on the verge of tears, but if she was, she fought it well.

“You cannot go,” she whispered. “Nathaniel, you are part of our lives here now. Did you not say you were a part of this family? Well, you are. You are one of us! You cannot go now. Please, please, stay.”

He reached for her hand, needing some sort of touch between them. When she grasped his hand more tightly, it nearly broke him. It was inappropriate indeed for her to be in his chamber and for him to hold onto her, but he couldn't help it. With Eleanor, everything felt all too natural.

“I am sorry,” Nathaniel whispered. He’d made the decision as he left the solicitor’s office. “America is where I belong these days,” he reminded her. “It is where I have built a life, where my investments and business thrive. I have nothing here.” He shrugged. “Nothing to keep me here.”

“You have us,” she reminded him, leaning forward, her hand clutching tighter. “Does that count for nothing?”

“More than you know.” He raised her hand to his lips and bent over it, kissing the back. A tense silence fell between the pair of them as he kissed her hand. He wouldn’t have blamed her for pulling back from him, as it was so improper, but she didn’t, and by the time he looked up again, he found her cheeks flushed red.

“I have no business here, no life, so it is right I got back to America. If I fought the will in a court of law, I would be fighting only to inherit his debts. It is not worth it. Besides, London irritates me. I hate the gossip of the *ton*.”

At his words, she grimaced and looked down at the connection of their hands. They had not yet released their grasp on one another.

“None of us like the gossip,” she said simply, “but that does not have to be the summary of a life here. Do you miss America so much?”

“I do,” he confessed with a nod. He’d been loving his life here with Eleanor and her family. Yes, a part of him wanted to keep it, but he also felt the world had given him a sign. London and England were clearly not for him.

“But I…” Eleanor broke off, her breath hitching. Her hand adjusted on his and he held her palm tighter, feeling the intimacy of that grasp. “I cannot imagine life anymore without you here. Is that not strange?”

“I know what you mean,” he whispered, holding her hand close to his chest. “It is why I have a question for you, Eleanor.” He breathed deeply, summoning the courage to ask something that made his heart thud against his ribcage. “Come with me.”

“What?” She jerked her head up, her eyes wide in surprise.

“Come with me to America,” he said, his words filled with sudden urgency. “Is adventure not what you have always craved? We can adventure together. I can show you a new world, Eleanor, show you everything. I can do that for you.”

Her lips briefly smiled, but that expression didn’t quite reach her eyes.

He was about to ask her to marry him, to be his wife, to forget Briarhurst and love him instead, but that hesitation in her expression made him halt.

“You will say no.” He read her thoughts on her face and hung his head, looking down at the grasp on their hands again.

“Not because I wish to say no.” She leaned forward, too. Her other hand rose between them and she clung to his waistcoat. The intimacy meant everything to him, and he raised his other hand, laying it over hers on his chest. “Believe me, Nathaniel, you have changed much in his house, especially for me, and yes, I’d love to come with you. But I cannot.”

He raised his gaze, meeting her own where he could see she was very much on the verge of tears now, blinking madly as those green orbs glistened with unshed tears.

“I have to stay. I cannot turn my back on my father and Bea. They need me. Bea needs her lessons, and my father needs my support.”

Nathaniel smiled sadly. It was the love she had for her family, her devotion, that was one of the things he admired so much about her. “You have the kindest heart, Eleanor.”

She shook her head as if she could not fathom his words.

“You truly do,” he whispered softly. “There is something more I wish you to know. I quite understand why you cannot come with me, but I cannot stand back and watch you marry Mr. Briarhurst.”

She blinked as a single tear escaped down her cheek. She didn’t bother raising her hand to wipe it away, for her palms were clasped in his own.

“You would be marrying a man not only so underhanded to steal another man’s fortune, but a man who seeks you out only because he believes you have a dowry.” At his words, she closed her eyes, a look of understanding crossing her face. “You cannot marry him.”

“I have no wish to.”

“Good,” Nathaniel said with determination. “I have made sure that you do not have to.”

Her eyes shot open, and she looked at him again, more tears escaping down her cheeks. “What do you mean?”

“I have left something for your father,” Nathaniel explained in a rush. “In his study. I have already helped him to improve his investments and his financial situation, though it may be some time until he sees the full fruits of it. In the

meantime, I have left him a gift of some money. It is my Christmas gift to him, a thank you for all the kindness and hospitality you have all shown me.”

“A gift of money? God’s wounds, how much have you given?” she said, clear panic in her eyes.

“Do not fear,” he assured her. “I can afford it, and it is what I wanted to give. That reminds me. Before I go, there is something I have for you, too.”

He released her. His palms felt abruptly cold without her in his grasp as he moved to another trunk and pulled out one of her Christmas presents. He returned to kneel in front of her and proffered up the tissue-wrapped bundle.

“I cannot open a present before Christmas.” She shook her head.

“You can. Please, for me,” he urged. “I wish you to have it.”

She shakily took the parcel, continuing to look between him and the gift, as if the very last thing she wished to do at this moment was think of presents. Slowly, she unwrapped the string and then the paper, her face softening into the sweetest of smiles when she saw the sueded gloves.

“They’re the ones I saw in the shop,” she murmured in surprise. “You noticed. You remembered.”

“Of course I did.” He shrugged as if it was obvious. How would he have done anything else?

“You have been too generous with your money, to us all.”

“No. Money is not important. *This* is what is important.” He rested a hand on her cheek, finding such intimacy strangely easy in this moment. He brushed his thumb to the side of her smile. She leaned into his hand, closing her eyes as if indulging in his touch.

“Thank you,” she whispered, holding the gloves close to her chest. “Thank you for everything.”

He shook his head, not needing her gratitude. The greatest comfort for him as he returned to America would be knowing that she was safe from Mr. Briarhurst.

“You do not have to marry him now,” he reminded her, his voice deep. “The money I have given your father will tide you all over until the returns on his investments come in. You are safe from him.”

She opened her eyes and reached for his hand once more, taking it in her own.

“I will not marry him,” she assured him. The strength in her voice made him lift her hand once again and kiss the back. He longed once more to ask her to come with him, but he knew he should not. She had already given her answer on this score. She would stay here with her father and her sister, for they needed her. “Please say this is not goodbye for good,” she pleaded. “You will return to England someday, will you not?”

“That I do not know.” In his gut, Nathaniel felt a hatred for the country at this moment. He owned nothing here, and the *ton* was cruel to him, constantly whispering about how he was the black sheep in the family when he had actually been the wronged party. How could he stay and put up with such whispers? How could he ever return to face those cruel gossipers again?

“Oh, God.” She bent her head forward.

Nathaniel was in danger of kissing Eleanor, of taking an indulgence he knew he should not. Instead, he rested his forehead against hers. It was an intimate moment, one neither of them disturbed as they both sat there in silence, leaning against one another.

“If only we had met a different way, eh?” he whispered. “If only life had

dealt us a different hand in life.”

“If...” she whispered, clearly not liking the word.

Nathaniel released her, knowing he had to move back from her now. If he stayed with her, he truly was in danger of being highly inappropriate and kissing her, something he longed to do. She made a small sound as they released one another, and he knew his heart was not the only one aching in that moment.

They cared for one another deeply, but an ocean would soon separate them.

“I must go to your father to say goodbye. I wish to make sure he has found my gift.” He stood and slowly clambered over the portmanteaus, moving toward the door. Glancing back, he saw that Eleanor had not moved yet. She fidgeted with the gloves on her lap, holding them tightly, a betrayal of just how dearly she loved them.

“What of Bea?” she asked suddenly. “She will be heartbroken to see you have gone in the middle of the night without saying goodbye.”

“I have written her a letter,” Nathaniel explained softly. “I shall leave it for her to find.”

Eleanor nodded and chewed her lip.

“What is it?” he asked, sensing there was something more she wished to say.

“It’s just...” She sighed, deeply. “I understand why you are going. You think there is nothing left for you here now, but what of the tenants?” Her reminder made him stiffen. “What of all those people you fought for before? What will become of them now?”

“That I do not know.” He shook his head gravely. In truth, he didn’t know what to do for them, for there was nothing he could do. If he went to court over the will, they’d be caught up in the debts and the land would no doubt suffer further. “I fear they are beyond my help now.”

Eleanor nodded, her breath hitching.

Nathaniel moved back toward her sharply, his heart aching at the sight of her tears. He caught up her hand again and turned it over, this time kissing the inside of her wrist in a more intimate way. She smiled sadly at the touch.

“Goodbye, Eleanor,” he whispered.

“Goodbye.” She managed to utter through her tears.

Nathaniel released her and moved back to the door, glancing back at her once. Seeing her sat on his portmanteau, knowing he might never see her again, simply made things worse. He turned and left.

The early hours of the morning were greeted with a gray light over the estate.

Unable to sleep, Eleanor had come down to the library, sitting in the window seat with her dressing gown wrapped around her shoulders and her hair loose. Her eyes were on the drive. The snow had stopped falling and had at last begun to melt.

With patches of the ground now visible, it was all too easy for the carriage to be brought out from the stables. The horses didn't neigh or whinny anywhere near as much as they had done the last few days, complaining against the cold.

When the door opened and the trunks were taken out, Eleanor planted her hands on the glass, desperate for one last sight of him.

Nathaniel helped the footman take the bags out, assisting in latching them to the carriage. She watched, her heart aching as she realized that Nathaniel had never made any objection about their lack of staff. He had been happy to help out where he could, muddling in and carrying bags.

Dressed in a thick black frock coat with a low-lying top hat, he was quite austere. Strangely, Eleanor was reminded of the first night she had ever seen him, where she had suspected him of being severe in manner, the sharp scar across his face hinting to a dangerous character.

How wrong I was.

Her fingers traced him through the glass, watching as he moved around to the side of the carriage. She now knew what a gentle heart he had, a good one, one full of laughter and good humor. It felt wrong indeed that the world had dealt him such a cruel hand, that he had nothing left of his family's and no chance to challenge the cruelty he'd been dealt thanks to Mr. Briarhurst's debts.

"It is unfair," Eleanor said into the air. "So unfair!"

Another appeared outside, walking down the front steps. It was her father, and he moved toward Nathaniel, shaking his hand. She couldn't hear what

they said to one another through the glass, but whatever was muttered was clearly heartfelt as the two men smiled at each other and shook hands. She judged her father was wishing him well on his journey, and perhaps even pleaded with him again to stay for Christmas Day, for Nathaniel shook his head.

Why must he go now?

Eleanor swallowed around a lump in her throat, confused and baffled. She could only judge he felt a need to get away now, a desperate longing to escape before Christmas came. He needed to return to the life he knew and be far from this place that had shaken him to his core.

Nathaniel moved to climb into the carriage and glanced back once at the house. He seemed to take it all in with a sad sort of smile on his features, as if he would miss the place. Then his eyes found Eleanor in the window of the library, and his body stiffened.

She raised a hand and waved slowly at him, in sad parting.

He mirrored her action, raising and waving his hand too. He nodded his head, a silent understanding passing between them.

I should have told him. I should have told him I love him.

When he had asked her to go with him to America, she had longed to say yes, to tell him that she loved him and wished to marry him, but she could not. He had made his decision to return whether she came with him or not.

My place is here. I will not turn my back on Bea and my father.

Then Nathaniel was gone. He stepped into the carriage and within seconds, it pulled away, rocking over the patches of snow and damp earth that had been revealed as the ice melted.

A door in the library opened and Eleanor turned to see her father had returned to the house. He had pulled a frock coat over his loose shirt and trousers.

“Eleanor,” he whispered and walked toward her.

Her breath hitched as another tear escaped down her cheek. She had done so much crying this night she thought it baffling she had anything left inside her with which to cry, but the tears just kept on coming.

“I’m so sorry for you,” Richard said, moving toward her. She stepped off the window seat and moved to him, the two of them coming together in an

embrace. “I knew you cared for him, knew it without a doubt, yet I do not think I realized just how much. Do you love him, dear?”

She didn't answer him. She just released a great sob and cried on his shoulder. For so long she had been strong for her father, quite immovable and strong as stone, not giving way to emotion at all for he had needed her to be strong. But tonight, that seemed to have come to an end. She didn't hold herself back from her cries as he held onto her.

“I'm so sorry it has come to this,” he whispered and rocked her from side to side in their embrace, as he had done when she was a child. She clung to him, needing the feeling of safety that only her father could bring.

Chapter 24

“I don’t understand,” Bea said miserably, staring at her plate at the breakfast table.

Eleanor poked at the cooked eggs on her own plate. It was a tradition for them to have pate with bread and eggs on Christmas Eve. Though the food stretched out beautifully between them all, not one of them had taken a single bite. Eleanor kept drinking her tea, and her father clung to his coffee cup. Bea didn’t even drink. She just glared at her plate as if it was to blame for what had happened.

“It’s Christmas Eve,” Bea said pointedly, as if this explained everything. “He was supposed to be here tomorrow. He was going to be here for our traditions, our games. He said he was going to help me find the shilling in the figgy pudding.” She sighed heavily and folded her arms, her eyes wet and her cheeks ruddy.

Eleanor cleared her throat. She had done enough crying and was now determined to be strong for her sister’s sake.

“He did apologize for having to leave, but business has called him away. We can still have fun, Bea. We can do our traditions together.”

Bea didn't seem excited by this idea. Her bottom lip jutted out even more.

"We can play blindman's buff," Eleanor reminded her. "You love that game."

"You are going to a ball tonight," Bea added, her tone miserable. "You'll be spending the evening with Mr. Briarhurst."

Eleanor looked at her father sharply, realizing that in all the sadness of having to say goodbye to Nathaniel, she and her father hadn't yet spoken of the gift that Nathaniel had made to her father, nor of whether she still had to marry Mr. Briarhurst. Silently, Richard gave her a short nod. It was an indication that they would discuss the matter between them later, when Bea was not around.

"I am still here for most of the day," Eleanor said, returning her attention to Bea. "And I am here all day tomorrow. We can open our gifts in the morning. We can play in what remains of the snow. You haven't yet made a snowman this year. We could make one."

"We could." Bea wrinkled her nose, hardly seeming excited by the idea. "Why are you not more upset?" She suddenly sat forward, waving an arm madly at Eleanor, enough to make her flinch.

“Bea,” Richard said in a warning tone.

“Well? Why isn’t she? I can’t be the only one who thought Eleanor was going to marry Nathaniel instead of Mr. Briarhurst.”

“Bea!” Richard’s words grew sharper, taking on a tone he rarely ever used with his youngest. She sat back in surprise, her face going purple now.

Eleanor stood from the table. She couldn’t bear to listen to these words, couldn’t bear to see Bea and her father argue, nor to hear of how she could have married Nathaniel. She left the room, feeling Bea and her father staring at her back, though she didn’t meet their gazes.

As she walked away through the house, something struck her. Although Nathaniel had asked her to go with him, he hadn’t actually asked her to marry him, nor had he declared to love her. Could she have been mistaken in his affections? No, surely not. He had held tightly to her hand, kissing it, and for a few seconds last night, she had thought he was tempted to kiss her lips.

Maybe it was all in my imagination after all.

Not knowing where else to go, she made her way to her father’s study and stepped inside, feeling it was a good place to hide from the outside world. A

fire had been lit in the grate and she moved toward it, rubbing her hands together and staring into those flames.

It didn't take long for another to join her. Richard appeared, shutting the door softly behind him.

“Bea will be all right,” he assured Eleanor. “She is simply shocked and disappointed that Nathaniel left so quickly. She's young; she will bounce back. Children always do.”

Eleanor nodded, wishing to believe he was right.

“Father, Nathaniel said he gave you a gift.”

“That he did.” Richard moved to his desk and sat on the edge, sighing deeply and plunging his hands into the pockets of his tailcoat. “I came in here last night after the ball, shocked to find it waiting for me on the desk. When he came to see me to say goodbye, I tried to give him the gift back. It is too much, far too much indeed, but he would not take it back. He insisted it was the least he could do for giving him a home when he was in London.”

Richard shook his head again, seeming unable to take it in. “I knew the night I first saw him at that ball he was quite heartbroken. I think I am only realizing now just how lonely he was, too.” He smiled sadly. “We helped

diminish that loneliness, I think.”

Eleanor stepped toward her father.

“How much?” she asked with some desperation. “How much did he give you?”

Rather than saying anything, Richard leaned across his desk and opened a drawer, pulling out a slim slip of paper. He raised it in the air and offered it to Eleanor, so she could see for herself.

“One thousand pounds?” she muttered, her hands shaking around the cheque. “That is madness! How could he gift us so much?”

“That is what I said last night, along with a few choice words in between, curses of shock.” Richard laughed at himself. “He was quite insistent, though. Nothing I could say would persuade him to cancel the check. He confessed that he did it not just out of gratitude for a home, but to ensure you did not have to rush into marriage.”

He looked pointedly at Eleanor. She shifted where she stood, moving her weight between her feet.

“Now we know what Mr. Briarhurst is capable of, I am in agreement with Nathaniel that he is not a suitable man for you to marry. Besides, if he is hoping for a wife with a dowry, then he would be disappointed.”

“That he would be.” Eleanor nodded and moved to the desk, putting down the check and moving back from it. Standing tall, she decided it was time to tell her father how she truly felt about Mr. Briarhurst. “I do not like Mr. Briarhurst at all, Father. Not even a little,” she said in emphasis, shaking her head.

“Oh, I tried. I was happy to marry him, to do my duty because it would give Bea a good chance later in life to make a fine marriage of her own, perhaps one for love, but if you want the truth, this is it.” She bit her lip for a moment before continuing on. “I have no love for him at all, and like him even less.”

“That I am somewhat glad to hear.” Richard sighed, as if with relief. “I am sure Bea will be delighted to hear it, too. It is a good Christmas present to her, for her to know she will not be losing you to a man such as he.”

“Then I shall tell her.” Eleanor held her hands together, fidgeting relentlessly. She tried to stifle a yawn that threatened to overtake her, for she had been unable to sleep at all after hearing Nathaniel’s news the night before.

“Bea is right about something, you know,” Richard said softly. “She is not the only one in this house who thought you might marry Nathaniel instead.”

Eleanor looked down at her fidgeting hands. She could have told her father Nathaniel had asked her to go with him, but he had not proposed. Because of that fact, she chose not to tell her father.

“I married for love, Eleanor. You think I cannot recognize that same feeling in my daughter when she falls in love?” Richard asked, bending his head down a little to catch her gaze.

“It does not matter.” She shook her head, trying to force herself to look at ease. “Nathaniel is gone. I expect this morning he has boarded some ship and will be sailing far from London. He’ll be heading to America, to his next adventure.”

“I am still sorry it has come to this.” Richard took her hand, patting it softly. “I will be forever grateful to Nathaniel for more than one reason, but chiefly this.” He nodded his head down at the check on the desk. “He has saved you from a marriage you never had any wish to be a part of. He has done more than I could, and you are my own daughter.”

“Father, please—”

“No, it has to be said.” He raised his head with a comforting smile. “Nathaniel is a good man indeed. I am simply sorry it had to end like this.”

Now, come. It is Christmas Eve, and though there will be plenty of sadness for the three of us, I do not want it to be all the time. Let us go and give Bea a reason to smile.”

Eleanor took her father’s arm and followed him out of the room, eager to do as he asked.

“You are going to do it tonight?” Linora asked, in danger of dropping the glass of lemonade in her hands as she stared at Eleanor. Fortunately, Sophie was there to hold the bottom of the glass.

“Hurrah! At last,” Sophie declared with happiness. “I did not think I could come to your wedding and celebrate your union to a man such as him. When will you tell him?”

“It’s Christmas Eve,” Linora said simply to Sophie. “We are at a ball. Is now truly the time to end a courtship?”

“I no longer care.” Eleanor shook her head. There may have been a time where she felt enough for Mr. Briarhurst to speak to him at his house or at her own, privately away from other ears in order to tell him softly she could not marry him. But any benevolent feeling she might have had toward him had

vanished.

He is capable of true evil.

She turned and glared across the room at Mr. Briarhurst as he entered the Christmas Eve ball, talking to many around him. She kept trying to make sense of what must have been going through his mind the day he forged the late Duke of Windhaven's will. He hardly could have been upset at his friend's death to have decided to capitalize on it.

He disgusts me.

"Do it," Sophie urged with a wave of her hand. "Do it now before Mr. Briarhurst can dominate any more of your time."

"Good luck with that," Linora said quietly, waving her hand madly over Eleanor's shoulder, as Mr. Briarhurst was already making his way over to them.

"Eleanor, there you are." He smiled when he reached her side, as if the argument that had passed between them a few days ago hadn't happened at all. "Come, I have some people I'd like to introduce you to this evening."

“First, may I speak to you?” she asked hurriedly. The sooner they had this conversation, the better.

He appeared not to hear her, though.

“Ah, there you are,” he turned to a man nearby. “Eleanor, may I introduce Lord Yates?”

The next hour or so passed much in the same way. Each time Eleanor endeavored to talk to Mr. Briarhurst alone, he either found someone new to introduce her to in the room, or he reminded another acquaintance of how they were courting, and it may not be long before they were wed, too. When he spoke to Lord and Lady Fotheringhay, suggesting a wedding in the new year, Eleanor lost her patience.

“If you would excuse me, I need some air.” She curtsied to the group, knowing a decided way to get Mr. Briarhurst alone. He had a habit of needing to keep her at his side, so this would undoubtedly draw him away.

She crossed the ballroom and headed to a door to the side of the room. She stepped out into a corridor, glancing back to see Mr. Briarhurst was making some sort of excuse to Lord and Lady Fotheringhay as he walked in her direction. Eleanor let the door close and darted down the corridor, heading out through a set of glass doors.

They led out onto a small balcony, though the stone surround kept her caged in. It wasn't quite the escape to the garden she had been hoping for, but it would have to do. On either side of the balcony were vast lime trees standing in parts, half masking the windows nearby, so she was quite hidden as she walked to the edge of the balcony and gripped the stone balustrade, looking down at the garden far below.

It must be done.

The thought was a clear one. By tomorrow, she would be free of Mr. Briarhurst and could have a good day with Bea, far away from any thoughts of him at all.

“Eleanor?” Mr. Briarhurst appeared behind her, just as he had expected her to. “Do you have any idea how rude that was? We were in mid-conversation with Lord and Lady Fotheringhay. When you and I are married, I expect you not to make such an exhibition of yourself.”

She jerked her head toward him, narrowing her eyes to slits. There seemed an irony to his words. Was he not the one making an exhibition of himself, constantly showing off and boasting to anyone he could meet at these events? The idea he wanted to control her behavior when they were married sickened her.

This ends now.

She could have just said she no longer wished to court him. She could have made the conversation a simple one, yet a longing rose up inside of her. She wished Mr. Briarhurst to know that she knew the truth of his character.

“I know,” she whispered, her voice dark.

“Know? What?” He seemed baffled and gestured back to the doors. “We should return to the ball. Come, Eleanor.” He stepped toward the doors, but she didn’t follow.

“I know what you did. With that will.”

Her words must have halted him for she heard his footsteps stop.

Gripping to the balustrade, she turned to face him, putting her back to it.

“I know what you did,” she said again, noting the way he refused to look at her, his eyes on the door. His shoulders flinched, though, as if she had struck him with those words.

“I know that when your friend lay dying, you forged his will. So desperate for money, you took advantage of a man’s death. How could you?” she asked, her voice strained. “How could you do that to your friend? His last wish, to make amends with his brother, you destroyed quite willingly, and for what? For your own gain!” she hissed in anger.

Slowly, he turned back to face her. Mr. Briarhurst was almost unrecognizable to her at that moment. His face had altered, to an expression almost animalistic in its maliciousness.

“What did you say?” His voice was harsh.

“You took advantage of his death,” Eleanor said again, her voice rising now. She feared someone might overhear her, then she decided she didn’t care. The gossipers believed Nathaniel to be the evil party. If anyone was walking about in the garden below, let them hear who truly was to blame. “How could you do that?”

“It doesn’t matter.” He thrust a hand into his hair, making his usually waxed hair go wild. “It’s done now.”

“Done?” she spluttered. “That is all you can say? You ruin one man’s life and take advantage of another’s death, and all you say is, well, it’s done?”

“It is. This has nothing to do with you, Eleanor.”

“You did it for money! Do you not think I know about your debts too? All of it?”

He marched hurriedly toward her. She was so shocked she flattened her back to that balustrade. He placed his hand down on the stonework, towering over her, though he didn't touch her. He just sought to intimidate her with his presence.

“When you and I are married, there will be no more debt. It will all be at an end, and this talk of inheritances, of wills, it will all be academic. None of it will matter anymore.”

Eleanor couldn't stop the smile that reached for her lips.

“Then you are about to have your just deserts, sir,” she said simply. He blinked as if he did not understand her. “I have no dowry.”

“What did you say?” he hissed, bending over her once again.

“You neglected to ask my father what my dowry was worth, did you not? You just assumed because he was titled that I would have one, but I do not. I do not have much to my name at all—though it may be a few more shillings than you have, it is nothing.”

“No. No, no,” he said, one word following another fast. “I do not believe you.” He stepped back, gesturing to her so closely that she thought he might hit her, but he didn’t. He just waved his arms madly. “You have money. You must! What about all these new dresses?” He motioned down to what she was wearing.

Tonight, she was not wearing Nathaniel’s gown, though she presumed that was what Mr. Briarhurst was referring to.

“The only new gown I have was a gift from the very man you cheated,” she said, holding her head high. “He is kind. It was a Christmas gift.”

He looked disgusted and took a step back, his top lip curling into a snarl.

“You have no money and neither do I, therefore what you seek from me, you shall not get,” she said, her voice strong. “Our courtship is at an end, Mr. Briarhurst.”

He veered forward, his hands raising either side of her. Surely he would not hit her, but she was so intimidated by his manner, so unnerved as his lips parted, furious, that she wanted nothing more than to cower away and hide from him.

“This courtship isn’t at an end. You will be marrying me, Eleanor.”

“I will not!”

He raised his hands again, furious. She yelped in fear and leaned back over the balustrade, but all fell quiet. He didn’t demand she come with him, nor did he take hold of her.

Eleanor dared to open her eyes again and lifted her head, looking toward Mr. Briarhurst. They were no longer alone on the balcony. Another was beside them, holding back Mr. Briarhurst’s arm and pulling him away from her.

Nathaniel.

Chapter 25

Nathaniel gripped Mr. Briarhurst's arm hard, watching as the man's face shook in alarm. Nathaniel shoved back hard. Mr. Briarhurst tottered away on his heels, struggling to maintain his balance. He hit the other side of the balcony, staring at Nathaniel open-mouthed in shock.

"Would you like some assistance, Eleanor?" Nathaniel turned to her and offered his arm. She was red in the face from shouting at Mr. Briarhurst, cowering against the balustrade.

She took his hand, and he helped her off the balcony wall. Unable to stay away from her, he placed his palms to her arms, holding her close. To his relief, she smiled and moved closer to him, practically nestling herself in his embrace.

I thought I might never see you again.

There was much he wished to say, many things he longed to tell her about what a fool he had been, how he had realized standing on the ship as it was about to depart that morning that something she had said was right. What was more, he had realized how he could not leave her. She was too important to him now.

“You heard the lady,” Nathaniel seethed over her shoulder in Mr. Briarhurst’s direction. He’d come to the ball to find her, only to bump into Richard in the ballroom alongside Lady Linora, who had no idea where Eleanor had gone.

It was Lady Sophie who had appeared and pointed to the door, saying with some confusion that she had just seen Eleanor and Mr. Briarhurst walk through it. Nathaniel had marched out to the balcony in time to hear the end of their conversation and stop Mr. Briarhurst before he could demand any further that she would still marry him.

“Your courtship is at an end.”

The words seemed to take some of the fire out of Mr. Briarhurst. He slumped down against the stonework, his mustache quivering as his face fell.

“No dowry. No money. Nothing!” he hissed, more to himself than to the two of them. “It was all for nothing.”

“Not nothing.” Nathaniel felt a hatred curling in his gut. “You stole my family’s things from me, Mr. Briarhurst. The fortune is one thing, but the land, the tenants, the objects so treasured from the house. You stole it all from me.”

Mr. Briarhurst looked away. It was not the response he had expected. He thought Mr. Briarhurst might maintain his innocence, but apparently seeing that he could no longer recover any money through marriage, he had lost the willingness to continue in his fight. His shoulders hunched forward and he sighed heavily, not refuting it.

“What made you do it?” Nathaniel asked, needing to hear the words from him now. “I know it all. I know you must have received the letter from the solicitor giving David instructions on how to write a new will. You were handling David’s correspondence. Who else would see it but you?”

Then you forged a will either the day before or the day he died, and you took it to one of the tenants’ cottages to have Trevor and his wife sign as witnesses. They can’t read, so they couldn’t see what paperwork they were witnessing, could they?”

“You know all, it seems.” Mr. Briarhurst leaned forward, bracing his hands against his knees. Eventually, he nodded. It was such a curt and sudden action, Nathaniel shook himself, startled.

He stepped forward and Eleanor moved behind him, one of her hands curling around his arm as if to hold him back, fearing what he might do to Mr. Briarhurst.

“I was desperate,” Mr. Briarhurst said suddenly. “You do not know what

you're truly capable of until faced with such horror. Debtors were closing in around me. It was plain if I didn't do something, by summer, I would be in debtors' prison. I had to act." He looked up at Nathaniel as if he would understand.

"You chose to be a criminal?" Nathaniel said simply. "Don't look at me as if I can make sense of this. I cannot. I could take you to a constable. I could have you charged with forgery."

It was an empty threat. All the money was gone, after all. What would he be fighting for?

"I wasn't thinking straight," Mr. Briarhurst said, panicked. He stood straight. "Don't think I didn't grieve your brother. Of course I did. David was my dear friend. It shocked me when he said he was going to leave everything to you. He believed you deserved it. He wished to write a new will to take out the redundant bequest to your mother, and the small bequest he made to me. He was going to leave absolutely everything to *you*."

He waved a hand at Nathaniel. "But you didn't need it, did you? You were halfway around the world, enjoying a fortune of your own making. I needed it." He thrust his hands into his chest.

Still, Nathaniel shook his head in disgust. Staring at Briarhurst now, he could go some way to understanding how desperation had driven him to mad measures, but it wasn't enough to make it forgivable.

“I cannot accept what you did,” Nathaniel said simply.

Mr. Briarhurst capitulated back onto the stone balustrade and nodded.

“It hardly matters. By new year, I shall be in prison for not paying my debts.”

“Have you spent it all?” Nathaniel asked, needing to be certain. “All of my brother’s money. It is all gone?”

“Yes.” He hung his head once more. “I used it to repay some debts, then invested great lump sums. I thought it would make me money, that I would be richer than I ever could have imagined, but I...”

Nathaniel didn’t need to hear anymore.

“You are not a man with a head for business.” He waved his hand at Briarhurst, begging him not to go on. He raised and pinched the bridge of his nose, racking his brain and thinking of what he could do now.

He felt Eleanor's hand curling in the back of his jacket, and he looked back at her. A minute later, and she might have been hurt by Briarhurst. The man hadn't raised his hand to her, but Nathaniel didn't trust him enough to think it would never happen.

Nathaniel felt the guilt sway within him. In his sadness, he had briefly lost sense of what mattered to him in this world. What mattered to him was Eleanor. Bea and Richard mattered too, as did Trevor and the other tenants. He owed it to them to stay, to try again, to at least find a way to give the tenants a good life.

He was reminded of something he had shouted at his father once, years ago, in the midst of an argument.

“The tenants are not here to make you rich. You are responsible for them. You should be taking care of them, doing everything you can to give them a good life. You are their landlord, not their God!”

Nathaniel felt the truth of those words now. They had broken through the mist of sadness when he stood on that ship. Eleanor had reminded him of those tenants the night before, and it had dwelled on his mind ever since.

She is right. I have to stay, to fight for them.

“I have a proposition for you,” Nathaniel said calmly, finding his voice once more as he glared at Mr. Briarhurst. “I could take you to a constable now”—at this suggestion, Briarhurst grimaced—“but that serves little purpose. My suggestion is this instead. I shall buy from you the country estate and the townhouse that once belonged to my brother.”

Mr. Briarhurst stood off the balustrade, in danger of falling over in his shock. He stumbled toward Nathaniel, though Nathaniel took a step back, moving Eleanor with him, wanting to keep her as far from Briarhurst as possible.

“Buy them?” he said in disbelief. “Why would you do that?”

“For the tenants’ sake,” Nathaniel murmured. “I will do it for them. With the money, you can keep away the worst of your debtors.” It was the wisest plan. They would avoid a court, and he wouldn’t inherit any of the debts this way. What was more, he could get back what mattered to him most—the tenants. “You will leave everything in the houses to me too, and all my parents’ and my brother’s things. Yes?”

Briarhurst abruptly nodded. “But why?” he asked sharply. “Why do this for me? As you said, you can take me to a constable.”

“Someone once told me Christmas was a time for forgiving.”

Nathaniel grunted as he said the words and an image flitted across his memory. The image was of David and one of the last letters he had received from his brother when he was in America. It had arrived last Christmas, and David had spoken of forgiving one another and forgetting the past, of starting again.

“He valued you as a friend. Perhaps he was mistaken, or perhaps he saw some glimmer of goodness in you that I do not. Either way, for my brother’s sake, I’m willing to take a chance on it.” He stepped forward, releasing Eleanor from behind him. “Let me buy the deeds from you tonight, and I shall not report you to the constables. Do we have an agreement?”

Briarhurst paused momentarily, but it was only for a second. “I agree.”

“Lead the way. I shall come to your house, and we shall see this matter concluded.” Nathaniel pointed to the door, eager for Briarhurst to go first. He waited until he stepped through the doors before turning to face Eleanor. She was still pink in the face, her breathing heavy, but she seemed infinitely more at peace now than when he had first seen her out on this balcony. “I’ll come to you and your father at your house later tonight.”

“Yes, very well.” She nodded and briefly clasped his hand. He lifted it to his lips and kissed the back, hoping that the touch told her everything he longed to say in that moment, even though they did not have the time. Then he walked away, following Briarhurst.

Nathaniel's body felt cold as he stepped toward the townhouse that had once belonged to his brother. It transpired that in this last week, Briarhurst had sold his own townhouse and moved his things into David's rooms.

Briarhurst stepped down from the carriage beside him and gestured to the door.

"Let's get this over with."

Nathaniel steeled himself against the chill in the air and followed the man inside. It seemed that Briarhurst was doing little to curb his other expenses. A butler and a maid hurried forward, taking their coats and offering to prepare drinks. One level glare from Nathaniel told Briarhurst silently what his answer was.

"No, thank you." Briarhurst bid them goodnight and asked them not to disturb him in the study.

They went to David's study, where Nathaniel felt the cold from outside penetrate the building. There was no fire in the grate and no candle lit, only the moonlight shone through the window. The white light of the moon made the air somehow seem colder.

Briarhurst moved to the desk and scrambled in the drawers, searching for something as he flung off his tailcoat. Eventually, he found what he was looking for. He dropped the two house deeds onto the desk and stood back, gesturing to them for Nathaniel to check.

Nathaniel picked up the deeds and felt bile rise in his throat when he saw Briarhurst's name upon them. He didn't belong there. At least, after tonight, the memory of him on those pages would be gone.

"Here is what I shall give you for them." Nathaniel reached for a blanket sheet of paper, along with an ink well and a discarded quill on the desk. He wrote out two figures for each house and slid it toward Briarhurst, waiting for a complaint.

Nathaniel was offering a little less than the market value, but he knew it was a wise decision.

"Why not more?" Briarhurst asked, a note of panic in his voice.

"When the news of your bankruptcy breaks, you will be offered even less by other men," Nathaniel reminded him. "It is as much as you can hope to receive. Besides, do you not think you owe me something after what you have done?"

Briarhurst's pallor looked positively green as he slumped down into the chair once more. He wiped his eyes and sat back, muttering something to himself before he raised his voice enough to be heard.

"Please, believe me when I say, Nathaniel," the use of his Christian name made Nathaniel jerk his head to look at Briarhurst again, "I never thought I'd be capable of this. I never thought I'd steal, nor that I'd betray David's wishes to. It just sort of... happened."

Nathaniel was not so willing to forgive him. His glare settled more harshly on the man who had once been David's friend.

"Perhaps you have just realized what you are truly capable of."

Nathaniel's words made Mr. Briarhurst flinch. "Maybe," he said miserably.

"Come. Let's draw up the paperwork."

Nathaniel soon saw Briarhurst was in such despair that he wasn't capable of much. In the end, Nathaniel took the quill out of his hands and drew up the contracts himself. He made certain that everything was in order in the pages,

including the amount he would pay for each property, then he called for a footman in the house who witnessed the signatures.

When all was done, Nathaniel sat for some time staring at the papers. He felt strangely numb, realizing that all was settled at last. The land was in his name; the responsibility for the tenants' protection rested with him alone.

I can scarcely believe it.

Quite choked up with emotion, he fought the lump in his throat.

"I am sorry," Mr. Briarhurst muttered.

Nathaniel wasn't sure whether to believe him. Since he'd raised his hand to Eleanor, he was inclined not to trust Briarhurst. He had proved just what he was capable of now.

Nathaniel tucked the certificates and contracts into the pockets of his tailcoat and stood, moving toward Briarhurst and standing on the other side of the desk.

"I shall give you two weeks to have your things moved out of this house and

the country estate. After that, I shall be moving in. Oh, and one other thing.” Nathaniel leveled his glare at Briarhurst. “If you come near Eleanor again, I will be tempted to report you for what you did.”

Briarhurst shifted in his chair, a look of shock taking over his face. Then the smallest of smiles tweaked his lips, as if something had occurred to him.

“She said you gave her a gown,” he whispered, his voice light. “Not many men gift a lady a gown. Not unless she means something to them.”

Nathaniel nodded. He had no inclination to discuss Eleanor any further with him. As far as he was concerned, Eleanor was infinitely superior to Mr. Briarhurst. He didn’t deserve to speak of her.

“We shall stay in touch by letter.” Nathaniel turned to the door, ready to leave when something halted his movements. The hallway was dark, and all he could see was a shaky outline of the staircase in the moonlight streaming through one of the windows.

He could almost see a ghost from the past. He saw himself as a boy, running up the staircase with David behind him. They were arguing over some toy, the two of them laughing as they chased one another. There was another boy behind them. It was Henry Briarhurst, but when he was very young indeed.

Nathaniel looked down, remembering for just how long Briarhurst had been in David's life. For much of that time, Briarhurst had been a good friend to David, even if he had failed him in the end.

Nathaniel turned and walked back to the desk, extending his hand to Briarhurst. He took that hand in surprise, shaking.

"Merry Christmas, Briarhurst. May the next one be happier than this one for you," he murmured softly.

"Thank you." Briarhurst stiffened in his seat in surprise. "Merry Christmas, Nathaniel."

Stepping back, Nathaniel left, shrugging on his frock coat that he found on a hook in the entrance hall. He stood in the open doorway of the house, feeling the cold wind ruffle his hair and the back of his coat as he stared into the building.

Another ghost seemed to pass before his eyes. He saw his mother following two footmen who carried evergreens into the house. As she gave them instructions, David as a boy followed behind her, mimicking her shrill tone.

Nathaniel trailed after his brother, guffawing with laughter and clutching his stomach. Though he seemed to remember that the ache in his stomach wasn't

just from laughter at his brother's antics but the sheer amount of Christmas cake he had eaten.

Then, the memory changed. It was as if the boy that was David stopped short of the sitting room and turned back to face Nathaniel now. He smiled, as if he was truly looking at him.

Nathaniel closed his eyes tightly.

It's in my imagination. David isn't here.

He opened his eyes, and David was gone.

Chapter 26

Eleanor paced up and down the sitting room of the house. She'd lit some candles and spread them around the room, far more than they really needed for her and father to see each other, but she'd needed something to do as she waited for Nathaniel. In contrast, Richard sat in an armchair nearby. His eyes were the only thing that moved, flitting repeatedly from the fire to her.

“Will you not sit?” he said eventually, breaking the silence between them.

“No. I cannot.” She marched back to the windows and peered out again, but there was still no sign of Nathaniel.

“What did he say again?” Richard asked her. “He was going to buy the estates from Briarhurst? That hardly seems fair. They were his. He shouldn't have to buy his own estates.”

“He's doing it for the easiest life, I believe,” Eleanor muttered, returning to pacing up and down beside her father. “This way, they avoid court. He won't inherit debts, and he can put his own money into the estates for the tenants.”

She stopped walking briefly, thinking of what Nathaniel had said about the

tenants.

He is doing this for them.

There was the sound of a carriage outside and she shot back to the window. This time, Richard stood and joined her. They both watched as a carriage pulled up on the driveway. Before it had even halted, the door was flung open and Nathaniel jumped down from the carriage, hurrying toward the house.

Eleanor ran from the sitting room and into the hallway to meet him, with Richard quickly following behind her.

As Nathaniel stepped through the door, she stopped. She longed to throw herself at him, to embrace him as she had done on that balcony, but her father was behind her. She couldn't possibly.

She looked at Nathaniel as he looked at her. When he smiled, relief washed over her.

"It is done?" Richard asked, the first to break the silence.

"It is done." Nathaniel reached his hand into the pocket of his tailcoat and

pulled out the deeds, holding them high into the air for them both to see.

Richard clapped his hands together and moved forward. Rather than shaking Nathaniel's hand, he embraced him as a father might a son. Eleanor held her hands to her mouth, watching on as Nathaniel's face slackened to shock, then he hugged her father back.

"Well done," Richard said as he released him. "I thought we had lost you to the Americas. What happened to you?"

"Madness, I think, and despair," Nathaniel confessed, sighing deeply. "When I found out there was nothing to fight for, that no good could come from it, all I wished to do was run and return to my old life. I stood on the ship this morning, watching the sails unfurl, and it hit me like a bolt of lightning. I knew I did not want to go."

"Why not?" Eleanor found her voice. She looked straight at Nathaniel, longing to hear something more.

"It was something you had said. Well, in actual fact, two things you said."

Nathaniel passed the deeds into Richard's hands so he could investigate their contents, as he stepped toward Eleanor. There was still some distance and she ached to reach out and touch him, but she managed to hold herself back.

“The first was what you had said about the tenants, how they deserved fighting for.” He smiled, rather sadly. “You were right, Eleanor. No matter what happened with Briarhurst, they deserve a landlord who was at least going to fight for them.

“I thought of Trevor and Miriam with their baby. If Briarhurst continued to plunder the land and sell everything off, then Trevor could lose his position. They can scarcely afford coal as it is. What would happen to their child?” He shuddered as if the cold had reached his bones. “How many more families would suffer the same fate? I couldn’t just sail away and let it happen.”

Eleanor held her hands to her stomach, feeling it leap with excitement.

“You said there were two things I’d said,” she reminded him.

He glanced at Richard, seeming to check something, then he took another step toward her again.

“We spoke once of how I felt like I had family here again,” he said softly to her.

“You are family.” Richard cut in and they both glanced toward him as he lowered the deeds. “You *are* family, Nathaniel.” He walked forward and clasped Nathaniel’s shoulder. “Family does not have to be connected by blood. Now, come. You are shivering in this cold. You need to warm yourself by the fire.” He drew Nathaniel into the sitting room and Eleanor followed closely behind.

Nathaniel was ushered into the chair Richard had vacated not long before, beside the fireplace, and a brandy was pressed into his hands a few seconds later. Nathaniel just held the glass, as if he was uncertain if he truly wished to drink it.

Longing to be near him, Eleanor sat on a footstool near to the chair, wishing he would continue.

“You are welcome here any time,” Richard said, continuing their conversation from earlier. “It would have broken my heart to know you were spending Christmas Day on a ship.”

“I have done it before,” Nathaniel said with a sad look. “The first time I left for America, it was Christmas then. I spent Christmas Day on the deck of a ship, playing cards with some of the other crew. It wasn’t unpleasant, really rather fun—but this morning, no, it felt wrong. Despite the fact I was surrounded by the ship’s crew, I do not think I have ever felt lonelier.” His eyes flitted to meet Eleanor’s again.

“I am glad you are back,” Eleanor whispered and leaned toward him. Once more, she felt the desire to reach out and take his hand, but she held herself back. What would her father say if she did?

“Speaking of which, Bea will be delighted to hear you are back.” Richard stood from his own chair. “Let me go and tell her now.”

“Now?” Eleanor said in surprise.

“Something tells me she’ll be very glad to be shaken from her bed. It will be almost as good news to her as the news of your courtship with Mr. Briarhurst being at an end.” He smiled softly and patted the back of the chair. “I shall not be long.”

He left the room and, to Eleanor’s amazement, closed the door behind him.

Not only were she and Nathaniel now completely alone in the middle of the night, but he had shut the door, so they could not possibly be considered to be chaperoned by any passing member of staff in the corridor.

Eleanor took her chance. She leaned forward again and this time laid her hand on Nathaniel’s arm. He shifted the grasp so that his hand took hold of hers, curling their fingers together.

“Your father can be quite subtle,” Nathaniel said with an easy smile, “but I think I understand why he has left us alone now. And I am not going to pass up on the opportunity.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, her voice quiet.

He moved to the edge of his seat, still clutching tightly to her hand, his head bent toward hers.

“There was something more I realized when I stood on that ship. Not only was I about to sail away from the family I had come to care for, but I’d be sailing away from you—the only woman I have ever loved.” He shifted her hand, holding it between his own.

He loves me? How is this possible?

She parted her lips to tell him that she loved him too, but he went on, and she had no wish to interrupt him.

“I asked you before if you would come with me to America because I did not want to be without you, but now, everything has changed,” he said, his voice turning deep. “I intend to stay here in England.”

“You will?” she asked with excitement.

“Yes. My ventures will continue in America, but I shall take over my family estates and work for the tenants to see they are well taken care of. I can take trips to America, but I see no need to live there again, not now I have my family home returned to me.” His hands adjusted on hers, entwining their fingers together.

“So, I’d like to offer you something new, Eleanor. A life with me, one where I can take you on those adventures you have longed for, to see America and other places, but a life where our base will be England. A life where you will not be parted from your father and your sister. I also make the offer that they can come with us any time we wish to travel.”

“You would do that?” Eleanor leaned forward, nearly tipping herself off the stool. “You would bring Bea with us?”

“Of course. Something tells me she would like America. If she likes the tales of pirates, then she may be quite fond of the idea of the wild West, too.” He smiled softly. “I ask you this, not just in a manner that we could consider one another family, but by being one another’s family completely.”

He shifted himself off from the chair and knelt before her. Eleanor felt her

heartbeat echoing in her ears as she watched him, hanging onto his every word.

“Eleanor, would you marry me?”

She smiled so hard that her cheeks ached. It was mad to think that she could consider marrying a man she had known for so little a time, but she didn’t care. She loved him, and the life he was offering was one filled with so much happiness—how could she possibly refuse?

“Yes. Yes, I will marry you, Nathaniel,” she said in a rush.

“You will?” he asked again, as if needing to be certain.

“I will.”

They both laughed and he raised her hand between them again, kissing the back, holding that kiss far longer than she had ever done before. Such a rush of excitement passed through Eleanor that she quite forgot anyone else was in the house.

Overtaken by it, she felt bold, and leaned toward Nathaniel. As he lowered

their hands between them, she kissed him, pressing their lips together. If he was startled at her movement, he didn't show it. He kissed her back, with such passion that Eleanor was overcome.

She lost herself in that kiss, thinking only of Nathaniel and the promise they had just made to one another, when she grew aware of a sound in the distant regions of the house.

She and Nathaniel pulled back from each other.

"I shall have to ask for your father's blessing, of course," he said with a smile.

"Considering he just embraced you as if you were his son, I could probably take a good guess as to what his answer will be."

They laughed together, listening as running footsteps were heard echoing in the house.

"Bea? Bea!" Richard shouted after her. "Please be careful on the stairs. I do not want to spend Christmas morning calling for a doctor to check over any bruises you may get from falling down them."

“He’s here, he’s here!” Bea called back excitedly, her voice growing nearer and nearer the sitting room. When she reached the door, it promptly burst open.

Eleanor and Nathaniel stood, still grasping one another’s hands as Bea appeared.

She had a dressing gown tied tightly around her waist and her hair in bows to make ringlets for the morning. She smiled broadly when she saw Nathaniel and ran into the room.

“I knew you’d come back. You said you’d be here for Christmas.” She embraced him tightly around the stomach.

Nathaniel had to release Eleanor to hold onto her as he laughed. “I’m back. Merry Christmas, Bea.”

“Merry Christmas,” she said, her words muffled as she uttered them into his tailcoat.

“Well, I think this is time for celebration,” Richard called from the doorway. “Especially as my daughter has managed not to break a bone by falling down the stairs. Shall we have a drink to celebrate?”

Bea stepped back from Nathaniel and looked excitedly around.

“Lemonade for you.” Richard pointed a finger at her. She jutted her bottom lip out, though it was not for long.

She followed Richard to the corner of the room where he pulled out four glasses and a lemonade jug from a drinks cabinet, along with a bottle of champagne.

Eleanor laughed as Nathaniel took her hand again.

“Now?” he whispered to her, and she nodded, crossing the room with him. “Richard, may I ask you something?”

Richard paused as he poured out the champagne into the glasses. When Bea reached for one of the glasses, he conveniently must have seen what she did out of the corner of her eye and slid the glass along the table, out of her reach. Richard smiled as he looked down and noticed that Eleanor and Nathaniel held hands.

“I take it you have a very particular question to ask me, Nathaniel,” Richard

said good-naturedly.

“What question?” Bea picked up the glass of lemonade and raised it to her lips.

Eleanor winced as she looked at her sister, having a feeling she knew what her sister would do the moment Nathaniel managed to ask his question.

“May I have your blessing, Richard, to marry Eleanor?” Nathaniel asked in a rush. When there was a beat of silence in the room, where Richard stared, and Bea managed to miss her mouth entirely and tip lemonade from her glass down her gown.

“I shall be staying in England, and if I go to America, it will only be for short trips. I would not be taking her away from you, not from either of you,” he said hurriedly, looking at Bea with these words.

Bea’s mouth hung open. Clearly, she was in more shock than even Eleanor had expected her to be.

Slowly, Richard put down the bottle of champagne on the table between them. For an awful second, Eleanor thought he might say no. It was too awful, and she couldn’t understand why her father would turn Nathaniel down, especially when he clearly cared for Nathaniel so much.

All at once, Richard smiled and he reached across the table that separated them, taking Nathaniel's hand once again.

"I give you my blessing with all my heart, Nathaniel," he said, his voice loud across the room. "I thought it was too much for me to possibly hope my daughter would marry for love. I cannot tell you how delighted I am to be proven wrong. You have my blessing."

Nathaniel shook his hand and Eleanor took Nathaniel's arm, so thrilled she did not think she could step away from him.

"You're going to be married?" Bea asked, gesturing between the two of them.

"Yes, Bea, we are," Eleanor assured her.

"Yes!" Bea threw her arms into the air and promptly managed to spill what was left of the lemonade in her glass onto the floor. "I knew it, I knew I was right. Didn't I say?" She turned to their father, who was busy laughing at her reaction. "I knew they'd be married. I said, I did, didn't I?"

“You did,” Richard said with a sigh. “Something tells me we are never going to hear the end of it now.”

Eleanor laughed as she looked at Nathaniel, who was busy parting and closing his lips in amazement.

“How did she know?” he asked Eleanor.

“Apparently my sister can just see my heart as well as I can,” Eleanor whispered in his ear.

Bea began to dance around the room as Richard followed her, snatching the glass out of her grasp before any more danger could befall and the glass smashed into pieces.

Eleanor laughed heartily, scarcely able to believe the joy in her heart as she watched her father snatch up the glass. Bea dragged him into dancing as Nathaniel held tightly to Eleanor’s hand and lifted it once more, kissing the back. Across the room, Bea and Richard were no longer paying attention to their conversation, so busy with their dance.

“I heard what you said to Briarhurst,” Nathaniel whispered in her ear. “You were passionate indeed, accusing him of what he had done.”

“I wanted him to know what I truly thought of him,” Eleanor whispered back. “He deserves to be put in his place for what he has done.”

“Perhaps so.” Nathaniel smiled. “I have often admired you, Eleanor, but I do not think I have ever admired you more than when I overheard you telling Briarhurst what you thought of him. It touched me deeply.”

She smiled sweetly at him, feeling quite alone and intimate with him in the room. “Everything I said was true. There was one thing more I wished to tell him, though I never got chance.”

“What was that?”

She breathed deeply, summoning the courage to tell him the last thing she had been longing to tell him for some time now.

“That I am in love with you,” she whispered softly. “I wished him to know where my heart truly lies.”

Nathaniel smiled and stepped toward her. For a second, she thought he might kiss her again, but then Bea piped up across the room and they both stepped away from each other a little, as if they had been caught doing something

they should not.

“Shall we have the Christmas pudding tonight?” she asked their father. “To celebrate!”

“It’s not yet Christmas...” Richard trailed off and looked at the mantelpiece clock nearby. Seeing that it had indeed gone past midnight, he seemed to change tact. “Well, Christmas cake, anyone?”

Eleanor smiled and stepped forward, pulling Nathaniel’s hand to join her.

Epilogue

“Nathaniel, will you calm yourself?” Trevor asked, stepping into the building and laughing as he saw the decorations. “Something tells me that you have everything in hand for today. There is nothing for you to worry about.”

“I just want it all to be as perfect as it can be.” Nathaniel stood at his friend’s side, rubbing his hands together with trepidation. Now he had the country house back from Briarhurst, there was much that needed doing. Naturally, not everything could be fixed within a matter of weeks, so for now, it felt as if they had put rouge on a pig by dressing the house for Yuletide.

In the corner of the hallway was wooden scaffolding, but it had been mostly masked by evergreens and holly. White swaths of cloth draped a path toward the dining room where the staff Nathaniel had recently employed were hurrying to prepare the wedding breakfast. The scents of figgy pudding and all the other Christmas fare wafted from the room.

“Well?” Trevor said, turning to face Nathaniel. “Are you ready to go to church?”

Nathaniel moved between his feet again, bringing a deep rumbling laugh from Trevor.

“Another minute more.” Nathaniel walked into the dining room and looked around. There was not a surface that hadn’t been decorated for the occasion, either dressed in white for the wedding or for the winter theme. Even mistletoe hung from the candelabra overhead, the white berries glinting in the morning light that shone through the window.

“You know something?” a familiar voice called to Nathaniel and he jumped in surprise, turning around to see that as well as the staff hurrying around the room, another had entered.

Richard stood by the window, sipping a coffee that the housekeeper had clearly brought for him.

“Richard?” Nathaniel moved toward him. “You’re here?”

“I am. She is not quite ready.” He laughed and pointed at the ceiling. “Though don’t you worry. I think even wild horses couldn’t drag Eleanor away from being at the chapel on time. I was just going to say something to you, as I saw you.”

“What’s that?” Nathaniel asked, nervously glancing around the room. All seemed ready, despite his worries. With such a new household full of staff, he didn’t know how easy it would be for them to bring a wedding breakfast of this size together in just a matter of a couple of weeks, but they seemed to have managed it quite perfectly, in time for the twelfth day of Christmas.

“I told Eleanor a month or so ago that we would have to see her betrothed by Christmas.” He laughed abruptly and shook his head, raising his coffee cup to his lips to take another deep sip. “I can scarcely believe that she was betrothed by Christmas Day, and to a man she loves no less.”

Nathaniel smiled at these words. “Thank you, Richard. I am so glad you’re here.”

“Believe me, I am the one who is glad. Now.” He drank the last of his coffee. “I have been watching from this window and can see many of the guests are arriving.” He pointed through the glass and Nathaniel peered around his shoulder to see Richard was indeed right.

The chapel was across the estate, and from their position, he could see carriages arriving, some of the wheels struggling through the frost as they turned into the yard in front of the chapel. The chapel doors had been draped in evergreens and winter white flowers. Along the gate, on either side of the chapel graveyard, were more evergreens and sprigs of mistletoe. As people descended from their carriages, they all smiled and laughed together.

Amongst the crowd, Nathaniel saw a face walk forward he knew well. Miriam, Trevor’s wife, walked amongst the guests, wearing her best dress with their son in her arms.

“It seems the time is nearly upon us,” Richard said with laughter. “I shall go and fetch my daughters. You, Nathaniel, need to get yourself to that chapel.”

“I’ll be there,” Nathaniel promised, watching as Richard walked away.

He followed him out into the corridor where Trevor waited for him, scratching and itching in the fine suit Nathaniel had let him borrow for the occasion.

“I know. They’re very uncomfortable,” Nathaniel agreed. “But as best man, you have to wear it.”

“It’s so itchy,” Trevor complained. “Oh, that reminds me, before we go.” He hurried back to a hall table where he snatched something and attached it to his cravat with some difficulty, then he returned to Nathaniel’s side.

Nathaniel blinked, in shock at what Trevor was now wearing.

On the cravat was a small tie pin, made of pure silver and inlaid with the initials *DM*.

“My brother’s?” Nathaniel whispered in amazement.

“Yes.”

“I thought...” Nathaniel trailed off. When he had retaken possession of the house, he had discovered Briarhurst had already sold some of the items from the house, including their mother’s jewels. Nathaniel hadn’t yet looked to see if his brother’s things remained in the house.

“It was Miriam’s idea,” Trevor explained softly. “She said how nice it would be if I could find something in the house to wear to bring your brother into the ceremony. After all, he should really be your best man, should he not?” He wore a gentle smile. “At least this way, he’s with you in spirit.”

Nathaniel did not have the words to thank him for the kindness of this thought. He gripped Trevor’s shoulder and let that action stand for his gratitude instead. Trevor plainly understood and nodded.

“Now, come. Let’s get you to this chapel. I cannot wait to see the gossiping that will happen when they realize one of your tenant farmers is your best man.” He rubbed his hands together, as if up to great mischief.

Nathaniel laughed and led the way out of the house. They walked toward the chapel, both of them occasionally in danger of slipping on the frosty earth,

though they managed to stay standing.

Nathaniel hardly cared if people did whisper and gossip. He'd always been talked of, and he doubted that gossip would go away now many people in the *ton* were speculating why Mr. Briarhurst had sold the estates back to the new Duke of Windhaven. Nathaniel, rather than being irked by the stories, had found the scandal sheets' wild guesses rather entertaining.

Some writer had created a mad story of how Nathaniel had usurped Mr. Briarhurst completely, not only in his estates, but in the affections of the woman he loved, for now Nathaniel had not only his houses but was to marry the woman Briarhurst was courting.

If only they knew the truth. They would curse Mr. Briarhurst's name.

Nathaniel reached the chapel and watched as some of the footmen moved the guests' carriages into a neat line in the yard. They had purposefully invited few guests, people they considered dear friends and family members. No one they had no liking for would be here today.

Nathaniel caught sight of Lady Sophie and Lady Linora as they arrived. They both offered an eager wave and stepped into the chapel, moving to find their seats.

“Are you ready?” Trevor asked, moving to the chapel door.

“There’s one thing I have to do first. I’ll be there in a minute,” Nathaniel promised. Trevor smiled and disappeared inside.

When he was quite alone, Nathaniel climbed the gate into the chapel yard and moved toward the graves at the rear of the path. He halted, his boots dampening in the frosty grass, when his eyes fell on his brother’s grave beside those of his mother and father.

He had been here many times as of late, and the flowers he had laid before were still blooming freshly on all three graves. Even his father’s bouquet was as large as his brother’s, for Nathaniel thought no longer of the argument they had once had. He just wished he’d had time to make amends to his father before he was lost from this life, too.

Stepping forward, Nathaniel bent down beside his brother’s grave, addressing him as if he could still hear.

“I wish you were here,” he whispered to the grave. “Trevor is right. You should be here. I wish you could have known her, and her family.” It was something now he wished he could write to David about, to tell him all about Eleanor and the life he was excited to share with her, but David was not just separated from him by an ocean anymore, and no letter could cross that distance.

“But I’ll be thinking of you, brother. Rest assured of that. And if one day I’m ever so fortunate to have a son...” He paused, knowing what promise he wished to make. “He will be named in your honor.”

Nathaniel reached for the boutonniere in his tailcoat and pulled out the flowers. It was a small sprig of three winter flowers, and he retrieved one. He laid it down onto the stone that bore David’s name, beside the other bouquet, then returned the boutonniere to his lapel.

“Wish me luck,” he whispered and stood again, returning to the chapel.

Inside, the air felt Christmassy indeed. If he had thought the house was decked in a lot of evergreens then he was wrong, for this truly was an awful lot of greenery. Every surface was covered in green leaves and white flowers.

He moved to the front of the chapel, waving and smiling at those he knew sitting in the pews. He greeted Miriam briefly and she smiled up at him, holding onto her son who was sleeping peacefully in her arms, then he moved to stand beside Trevor at the altar.

“You ready?” Trevor asked. He frowned down at the bottom of his trousers. “I think you just like to cause a scandal. You’ll have these fine ladies of the *ton* clutching at their pearls and wondering why you have come in covered in frost and dew.”

Nathaniel laughed and turned to face the door, for the organ music was beginning. Clearly, Eleanor had arrived, and he couldn't wait for their ceremony to begin.

“Well, maybe I like being a different sort of duke,” he whispered to Trevor.

In the doorway appeared Eleanor on the arm of her father. Behind them walked Bea as bridesmaid, clutching to a smaller version of the bouquet that Eleanor held in her grasp. Nathaniel's eyes shot to Eleanor and never once looked away.

She was quite beautiful, dressed in a gown of ivory white and hemmed in emerald green. She wore silken gloves and the necklace that glittered at her throat was one he had given to her the day before. Her smile was as great as his own as she walked toward him, her breath seeming to come in short, fast starts. Richard whispered something in her ear, and her breathing calmed a little.

To Nathaniel's great excitement, he saw Eleanor moving rather quickly down the aisle toward him, so fast in fact that there was still plenty of organ music left to be played when she reached him.

Richard passed Eleanor's hand into his own. “Welcome to the family,

Nathaniel.”

“Thank you, Richard.” Nathaniel threaded Eleanor’s hand through his arm and turned to face the altar, bending his head toward hers so he could whisper in her ear. “You look beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she murmured. “I have barely slept I have been so excited.”

“I was much the same,” he confessed. “Well, I’ll sleep well tonight, Eleanor, knowing we do not have to say goodbye again.”

“As will I.” Her smile was something he committed to memory, never wanting to forget this moment, as the priest stepped forward and began the ceremony.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here together in the sight of God to join together this man, Nathaniel Margrave, Duke of Windhaven, to this woman, Lady Eleanor Robinson.”

THE END ?

Can't get enough of Eleanor and Nathaniel? Then make sure to check out the

[Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...

What pivotal moment on Christmas Day will influence Nathaniel's decision to reach out to Mr. Briarhurst?

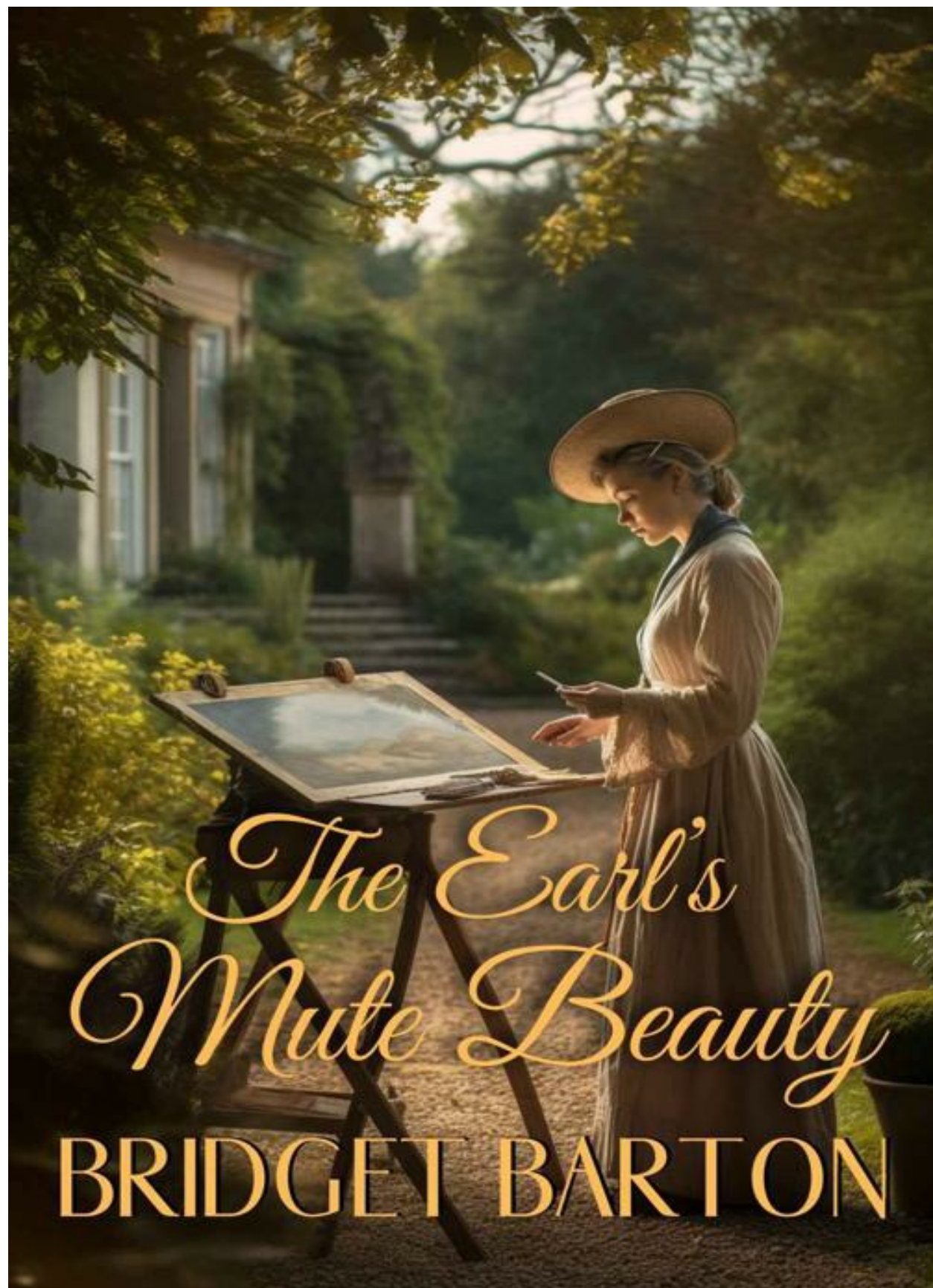
What will Eleanor's father's letter reveal about his experiences in America?

What unexpected news will Eleanor share with Nathaniel, and how will he react to it?

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://bridgetbarton.com/nathaniel>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from “**The Earl’s Mute Beauty**”, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*



*The Earl's
Mute Beauty*
BRIDGET BARTON

The Earl's Mute Beauty

Introduction

In a world where society's cruel judgment thrives, Evelyn Caldwell, a gifted but mute artist, has found solace in the peaceful countryside, far from the ton's relentless scrutiny. Yet, when she's summoned by a deafened and reclusive war veteran, her tranquil life takes an unexpected turn. Their first meeting is marked by an intense, magnetic attraction, but also marred by misunderstandings arising from their undisclosed disabilities.

Could this handsome gentleman change her destiny once and for all?

Colonel Jonathan Russell, once a gallant officer, now grapples with the haunting echoes of war, a deafness that has left him feeling isolated and adrift. When he commissions Evelyn to create a mural at his country estate, he's drawn not only to her artistic talent, but also to the enigmatic allure that surrounds her. His initial frustrations and anger with his own disability slowly give space to hope, as he unexpectedly finds his dreamy muse in her.

Could her serene beauty put some color back into his silent life?

As they embark on an artistic collaboration that transcends words, Evelyn and the Earl forge a deep connection, reflecting their unique battles. However, before they can confess their growing love, a malevolent force tears them apart, forcing them to confront past insecurities. Can they summon the strength to overcome adversity and embrace a future where love knows no boundaries? Or will their journey end in a silence that will painfully echo through time?

Chapter 1

Jonathan's hands were hurting. The paintings were a lot heavier than he anticipated. And there were a lot of them. So much for thinking this would be an easy job for him to do that he didn't need to delegate to anyone else.

It should have been a distraction for him to keep him busy instead of sitting in his chair staring out of the window like an incapacitated fool. Jonathan wasn't about to do that. He needed some activity to keep his mind occupied.

If he stopped for more than a few minutes, the ringing in his ears started again. Jonathan didn't want to be in pain from it. It was bad enough that he couldn't hear anything and that when the ringing wasn't happening, it felt like he had something clamped over his ears, but when the ringing started ...

God, of all the things to suffer from after fighting at Waterloo, why did it have to be deafness? Jonathan knew he should be lucky that he hadn't been killed, and the scars he had accrued were not obviously visible, but he didn't want to be deaf. It was horrible, and Jonathan felt so low in his moods that he ended up in tears. Who knew that losing your hearing would make someone appreciate sounds, no matter how annoying, even more?

Jonathan would love to hear properly again. It was bad enough wandering around the house when the servants were trying to get his attention. He felt like a simpleton.

Thank God the war with France was over, and he had been medically discharged from the army. No more going to war. Then again, knowing that he had been released was a little embarrassing. He was a colonel, after all. He should have been climbing, and he got this due to his hard work with the army?

Stop thinking about something you can't change. Focus on going forward and adapting. That's all you can do now.

He needed to keep moving. There was a tingling in his ears, which said that the ringing would start again. Or maybe it was because someone was about to talk to him. Jonathan had found out after a while being at home that he could sense when someone was nearby and talking; the ringing began, almost like a vibration.

When he was looking at the person speaking to him, reading their lips, the ringing certainly vibrated in time to what he believed were the words. He still couldn't hear them, but it helped that he could read lips better. Everyone knew to face him and speak clearly when addressing their master.

It worked. Jonathan almost held onto some hope that he was getting better. He could hold onto that denial a little longer.

Turning, Jonathan saw his butler, Stokes, walking towards him. The flame-haired middle-aged man gave him a nod and ensured his employer was looking at his mouth before speaking.

“Mr King is here, My Lord. He’ll take over.”

“Thank you, Stokes.”

Jonathan was aware that he was speaking, and he knew what he was saying, but he had no idea if he was speaking loudly or quietly. From Stokes’ expression, he was speaking at a normal level. That was something; the last thing Jonathan wanted to do was sound like a fool.

He turned to Mr King, the laborer practically towering over him. At six-one, it was rare to have someone taller than him, and Jonathan almost took a step back to look at him properly. He gave the man a nod.

“Thank you for coming, Mr King.”

Mr King said something but didn’t open his mouth enough for Jonathan to read his lips properly. It just came out as a jumbled mess. Frowning, Jonathan looked at Stokes. His butler was always there to translate for him.

“He said it’s not a problem, and he’s sure you will be fine with the finished product.” He paused, waiting for Jonathan to take this in. “He also asked what you would like done to it? You did say you would give him more details once he turned up.”

Jonathan caught Mr King looking at them oddly. He must have thought Jonathan was slow, and he hurried to reassure, gesturing at his ears.

“Forgive me, Mr King. I can’t actually hear anything. My fault for standing too close to the cannons at Waterloo.”

“Oh.” Jonathan saw the man’s mouth move. “I had no idea, My Lord.”

“As long as you look at me when you speak and make it clear what you’re saying, I’m fine. But it is a bit of a struggle.”

“I heard you had been in the army, Lord Ashbourne.” Mr King peered at him. “You’ve been talked about as ...”

The words trailed off again. Jonathan could feel his frustration growing. When he met someone new, getting used to their different speech patterns was difficult. He had got it down to perfection with his household staff and a couple of close friends who hadn’t distanced themselves from him, but it was

harder with complete strangers. And it was really embarrassing.

Stokes seemed to realize that Jonathan was getting upset because he moved over to Mr King and said something to him. Whatever passed between them had Mr King nodding and, with one last glance at Jonathan, started walking back towards the front door. Jonathan frowned.

“Where’s he going, Stokes?”

Stokes turned to him.

“He’s gone to get his work tools from his cart outside,” he said. “I’ve told him what you’ve wanted for the wall, and he’ll do it to the best of his abilities.”

“Thank you.” Jonathan rubbed his ears. “I hate being deaf. I want to be back to normal, but unless someone knows how to send me back in time ...”

Stokes puts a hand on Jonathan’s arm, a gesture to make him look at the man. His butler looked sympathetic.

“We understand. It’s going to take time to get to the new norm, My Lord.

We're here for you.”

Jonathan knew that, and he was glad about it. As of right now, he was the only one of his family left. His parents were dead, and his sisters had left to live in the Americas, starting their own families.

Communicating with them by letters was not how Jonathan wanted to talk with his sisters, but he was glad that it was easy enough to convey himself that way. He knew his speech was a little off because he couldn't hear himself to know if it was right or wrong, and he didn't want to humiliate himself in front of his family.

Stokes, a former army veteran himself, understood him more than Jonathan anticipated. Having him around was like God had given him a gift. It was surprising how much patience one man had.

“Why don't you sit in the garden, My Lord? It's warm out there right now. I'll have Mrs Stokes bring some tea and cake out for you.”

“You don't need to shoo me out, Stokes.”

Stokes smiled.

“You need a moment to calm down. Then, once you’re refreshed, you can return to something else. Alright?”

Jonathan didn’t want to sit down and be lost in his thoughts, but Stokes was right. When he was upset, he needed to go elsewhere to calm down and reorganize his thoughts.

It was a relief that the cannon blast hadn’t deafened his inner thoughts, but there were times when Jonathan wished that he could just have nothing going on in his head; being stuck along with your thoughts and unable to express them properly was enough to drive anyone mad.

Besides, he didn’t need to stand over Mr King and watch him work. All the man was doing was smoothing down the wall and painting it with a fresh coat of white paint. Then, it would be ready for whatever Jonathan wanted to do. What he wanted to do with it, he wasn’t really sure. He knew he wanted some sort of painting – a mural, Stokes called it – but he wasn’t certain about what he wanted to do with that space.

It was something he needed to keep him busy. Something to occupy himself without making it feel like he was useless to everyone. His servants might not say it to him, but they had to be whispering behind his back. He goes to fight in France and comes back a different man.

A deaf man. Someone who was looked down upon. If he weren’t a decorated

officer and a viscount, he would have been tossed onto the streets and forced to figure things out alone. People were not kind to those outside the ton's regular norms.

Jonathan didn't want to have anything to do with that. He might as well get everyone to believe he was dead.

Heading out onto the terrace, Jonathan felt the warm sun on his face as he went to the table at the far end, just in the shade. He slumped into one of the chairs and closed his eyes. The ringing in his ears was building again, something that always happened after he had someone speaking to him. If only he could hear the words without needing someone to look directly at him or translate.

Jonathan hadn't liked being dependent on anyone when he was a child. His parents urged him to be strong on his own, saying they wanted to be sure he could take care of himself should anything happen to him. Jonathan had thought they were overreacting and worrying too much, but then his mother died when he was fifteen, and his father passed shortly after Jonathan's twentieth birthday.

That left him to look after his younger sisters and ensure they had good matches for husbands. Thankfully, both Amelia and Isabel had found good, kind men to marry, and they were in South Carolina working on a business

the husbands had started together. Jonathan was glad that his sisters were looked after properly.

After all, he could barely look after himself. If they were still under his roof, he would be floundering trying to look after them when he couldn't hear a word they said; his sisters tended to talk fast, and he'd had trouble keeping up with them when he could hear them.

His head was beginning to hurt, and not from the ringing. Jonathan pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. If only he had been blown up instead. Then he wouldn't have to deal with this.

A hand touched his arm, and Jonathan jumped. Mrs Stokes, the housekeeper, was leaning over him. A tea tray was on the table in front of him. The pleasantly plump woman gave him a gentle smile.

"Your tea, My Lord," she said.

"Thank you, Mrs Stokes." Jonathan frowned at the teapot. "Are you sure it's tea in there? I could do with a brandy."

"I'm afraid it's tea, My Lord. I think we need to get some more brandy as it's been finished."

Jonathan winced. He knew what she meant. He had been drinking all the brandy. But he thought there was plenty left. Had he really drunk all of it, and there was none in the house?

Maybe that was a good thing. Jonathan shouldn't be getting drunk all the time. It just resulted in him waking up with a hangover and feeling even worse.

He looked up at Mrs Stokes, who seemed to be waiting for his attention again. Then Jonathan noticed the stack of letters in her hand.

“What are those?”

“It's the second post, My Lord.” Mrs Stokes' expression suggested that this might not be news he wanted to hear. “I think most of them are invitations to social gatherings.”

Jonathan frowned at her.

“You know I don't want to go to any of those. There's no point in bringing them to me when you know my answer.”

“Forgive me, My Lord. It’s a force of habit.”

“I know. But don’t keep bringing them to me.” Jonathan paused. If only he could hear himself. He hated speaking with no noise at all. “How many are there?”

“There are less than before. I think the amount is ...” Mrs Stokes spoke the word slowly. “Dwindling.”

That was something. Jonathan did not want to be around anymore with the way he was. Being an earl and a decorated officer meant he would be in high demand, but he was not prepared to be paraded in front of everyone. They would all want to talk to him and wouldn’t understand that he couldn’t hear a word. Once they realized he was deaf, the ton would distance themselves from him. Nobody would want to associate with a man who would be classed as disabled. Jonathan really hated that word.

It was best to distance himself before anyone else did it to him. Then he wouldn’t feel rejected.

“I suppose there’s one good thing about not hearing anything anymore,” Jonathan said, gesturing at his ears. “I can’t hear how awful the music is, and the social gatherings won’t be loud enough to give me a headache.”

Mrs Stokes smiled.

“You didn’t have an ear for music before Waterloo, My Lord.”

“Now I don’t have any ears for music. That should stop people from inviting me to music recitals, at the very least.”

Mrs Stokes’ eyes twinkled. It was easy to be relaxed in her company. Along with her husband, Jonathan’s housekeeper was a godsend.

“Oh, this is for you, My Lord.” Mrs Stokes reached into the pocket of her apron and held it out. “You wanted me to get the name and address of that artist I was talking about. For the wall?”

It took a moment for Jonathan to remember what she meant. When he said he was looking for an artist to help him paint the wall, but he wasn’t sure who to choose, Mrs Stokes said she knew someone willing to help.

“Oh, yes?”

“Here you go.”

Mrs Stokes handed a piece of paper to Jonathan, who looked at the name. Evelyn Caldwell. Was this a woman? Jonathan knew there were female artists, but he had never encountered one.

“Is this a Mr or Miss Caldwell?”

“Miss Caldwell,” Mrs Stokes said when Jonathan looked at her again. “She’s a brilliant artist. I’ve seen some of her work, and she’s great. I think she would be just right for you.”

“How?”

But the housekeeper just smiled and gave him a nod before turning away, effectively ending the conversation. Jonathan watched her go, curious as to why she considered this woman just right for him with this project. What did that even mean?

He couldn’t figure that out for himself until he met her, anyway.

Chapter 2

“Evelyn! We’re back!”

Evelyn smiled when she heard Ignatius’ voice. She lowered her brush and stepped back to inspect her work. The painting was coming along really nicely. Almost done. The viscount who had commissioned her to paint a view of his estate would be really happy with this. Evelyn was glad she had a perfect memory so she could sketch out at the estate and then paint at home; the weather being unpredictable lately was an advantage.

She turned when she heard a knock at the door, and it opened to see her housekeeper, Mrs Barry, entering the room. The middle-aged woman smiled at her.

“Mr and Miss Savage are here, Miss Caldwell.”

Evelyn made the gesture to allow them entry. Mrs Barry moved aside to allow the tall, slim figure of Ignatius Savage to come in, closely followed by his daughter. Valerie strode past her father with a beaming smile and clasped Evelyn’s hands. It was their regular greeting, both of them pleased to see the other.

“That is just beautiful, Evelyn,” Ignatius declared as he crossed over to the painting. “Is it finished yet? You said it would be finished today, and Viscount Crowfoot had a deadline.”

Evelyn released Valerie’s hands and signed her answer at him.

“I’m just doing the finishing touches. Once it’s dry, you can take it with you. It won’t take long.”

“Perfect.” Ignatius beamed. “Time for some tea, don’t you think?”

Evelyn laughed and signed at Mrs Barry to fetch the tea tray. The woman nodded and left, closing the door behind her. As Ignatius leaned in to peer more closely at the painting, Valerie nudged Evelyn to get her attention.

“He’s going to smudge it with his nose if he’s not careful,” she signed, her eyes twinkling.

Evelyn bit back a giggle and signed back.

“I’m sure that won’t be the case, but if it does happen, he can explain to Viscount Crowfoot on his own. Nothing to do with me.”

Valerie's mouth screwed up as she held back a laugh. Evelyn felt warm and happy whenever she was around her friends. She had been alone in her own world for so long that having someone similar to her, both in creativity and physical issues, was like a godsend.

Ignatius had been a childhood friend of her father's, and he kept in touch while traveling around Europe. After Evelyn's father passed away when Evelyn was nineteen, he returned and started an art gallery and printing shop on the outskirts of London.

Despite the location, which was out of the way of most people, it was very popular, and Ignatius was kept busy. Valerie ran the printing shop, much to the bemusement of some clients, showing that she possessed her father's love for art. She was mute as well, and Evelyn felt less lonely when she found out about that.

It was hard communicating with people outside of the household, who were always used to Evelyn signing and knew how to interpret what she was saying, so to have others who understood her without Evelyn getting frustrated was a delight.

"By the way," Evelyn signed as Ignatius moved onto another painting, one propped up against the wall in its frame, "have you seen Lucas today? Ignatius said he was going to Brighton to oversee a gallery viewing there."

“Oh, he’s back now. Apparently, the gallery viewing was a success.” Valerie’s signing was getting more animated with her excitement. “I think we could open up a gallery there permanently. Father’s talked about Lucas being in charge of that.”

“That’s great! Is Lucas happy about it?”

“I think he is. He says it’s a great opportunity, but I think he’s reluctant to leave London.” Valerie giggled. “Honestly, he’s such a worrier. We’ve told him he’ll be perfect for the job.”

“Do you think he wants to stay because he loves London or because of something else?”

“What else could be keeping him here?”

Evelyn was tempted to point out that Lucas was in love with Valerie and wanted to stay around her, even though he thought his love was not returned. Far from it, Valerie was in love with Lucas herself, but she chose to tease him and hide her true feelings.

Evelyn could understand that her friend’s reservations about being mute were

not something she wanted to put on anyone else, but from what she saw, Lucas didn't care. He loved Valerie no matter what.

Evelyn could only dream of having something like that for herself.

“Oh!” Ignatius' sudden exclamation made both of them jump. Evelyn saw her father's friend hurry towards her, digging into his pocket and bringing out a letter. “I almost forgot. You've got another commission.”

“Have I?”

“Yes. An earl wants you to create a mural for him in his home. Apparently, his London residence isn't far from here, so it wouldn't be much to travel there.”

Evelyn scanned the letter. Whoever wrote this had nice handwriting. It was easily legible. It was from the Earl of Ashbourne, and he was asking her to paint a mural in the house he resided in for most of the year.

He also wanted her creative thoughts on the matter as he wasn't sure what he wanted. That was fine; Evelyn liked using her creative flair. People who saw a mute woman were stunned by her artistry. She liked surprising people.

She put the letter down to sign properly.

“Who is the Earl of Ashbourne? Should I know that name?”

“His earldom is in Derbyshire,” Valerie replied. “He’s also a colonel in the British army.”

“Was a colonel,” Ignatius pointed out. “He holds the title, but he’s not a soldier anymore. He was medically discharged.”

Evelyn frowned.

“What happened to him?” she asked.

“He got deafened by cannon fire at Waterloo. Can’t hear a thing now, apparently. He’s been hidden away in his house for over a year now. I’m surprised anyone knows what he looks like.”

Valerie giggled, squeezing Evelyn’s arm.

“You’re going into the unknown, Evie. You might know what this earl looks like more than anyone else.”

Evelyn frowned.

“That’s not funny, Valerie.” She turned to Ignatius. “Why do you want me to take this, Ignatius? I like the idea, but you know I don’t deal directly with clients or go to their homes. I stay in the house and do my work from here.”

“He’s asked for you specifically, and I think he wants you to be there to discuss it.” Ignatius shrugged. “He doesn’t know what to do with it, so going to the actual place would help you figure out what would be just right.”

Evelyn didn’t know what to say to that. Ignatius approached her shortly after he started his business to create work for him, provided she didn’t leave the house. It was far easier to stay where she was, not wanting people to stare at her and treat her like she was less than them. Her father had been a baron, which made her a member of the ton, yet Evelyn was treated harshly because she was not perfect.

It didn’t matter how pretty she made herself, how composed she kept herself or behaved; the fact she had been mute since birth and couldn’t speak made her very different. She remembered being slighted by pretty much everyone the first time she went into Society. Her first Season had been awful. Even the gentlemen would not interact with her. It was like nobody knew how to

talk to her.

Once her father died, Evelyn completely removed herself from Society, choosing to stay at home away from everyone. She had pretty much given up on finding a husband, seeing as nobody wanted a mute woman as a wife. Even if everything else was fine, that was enough for gentlemen to walk away from her and see her as useless. Evelyn was not dealing with that level of disrespect anymore.

Her life was going well, not seeing anyone outside of the house other than Ignatius, Valerie, and their assistant Lucas. Evelyn didn't want to ruin it by going out and visiting a potential client.

Valerie tapped her arm to get her attention before signing.

“This will be good,” she urged. “You will get a huge payment for this, and it’s the first time in a long time that you’ve done a mural. You like a challenge, don’t you?”

Evelyn did, and right now, she wished that Valerie didn't know that. She knew just what to say to pique Evelyn's interest.

She turned to Ignatius, who was watching her as if waiting for an answer.

“Does he know about my condition?” she asked. “And why would he choose me?”

“I honestly don’t know. He mentioned that someone had recommended you, but no names were mentioned. As for your condition, I don’t know if he knows who you are.”

“I’m a baron’s daughter,” she reminded him. “I was, at least. I don’t know if I can call myself that anymore.”

“Even so, you’ve been out of Society for years. And the Earl of Ashbourne has been in France fighting Napoleon, so he more than likely has no idea who you are.”

That didn’t bode well. If he wasn’t aware of Evelyn’s condition, this would get really uncomfortable.

The door opened, and Evelyn saw Mrs Barry entering the room with the tea tray. Ignatius took Evelyn’s arm and led her to the table at the far end of the room.

“Why don’t we sit down and have some tea? Then we can discuss what we

can do about this. I think this will be beneficial to everyone?”

“How?” Evelyn signed with one hand.

“I’m sure we’ll find out.”

Evelyn didn’t know how to respond to that.

“Miss Caldwell!”

Evelyn turned at the door. Her maid had snatched up her little notebook and pencil from the dresser and was hurrying over, holding them out.

“You forgot to put these in your reticule.”

“Thank you,” Evelyn signed, putting both items into her little bag. “I would be lost without that.”

Alison grinned and signed back.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine. You just need to smile, and your charm will shine through.”

Evelyn laughed.

“You are far too optimistic, Alison. Anyway, I’ll be back soon. Hopefully.”

“Yes, madam.” Alison curtsied. “And I hope you’ll tell me how it went. I’m curious about this mysterious earl.”

Evelyn didn’t respond, simply leaving the room. But, if she were being honest, she was also curious about the Earl of Ashbourne. After listening to Ignatius talk about him – that man was the fountain of gossip and could find out absolutely anything on a whim – Evelyn wanted to see what the fuss was about.

Apparently, the earl – also known as Colonel Russell – was a war hero who had been instrumental in several skirmishes against the French before being injured during Waterloo. Evelyn was horrified to hear that he was now permanently deaf, never to hear again. It must be horrible to be in that

situation.

She didn't know if being deaf or mute was worse when you were a member of Society. It didn't sound like Ashbourne would be accepted readily, either. Then again, he was a gentleman with excellent credentials, and he had to be rather wealthy, so there were more than likely several ladies who wanted his attention. But it would be for money and status rather than the man, Evelyn was sure. That couldn't be nice for him.

Although, given what Ignatius and Valerie had said, the man had also become a recluse. He had hidden himself away in his London residence since he returned from France, and barely anyone had seen him.

Evelyn wondered why he didn't go to his family estate in Ashbourne. He was less likely to be bothered in the Peak District. But that wasn't any of her business; Evelyn didn't have a right to ask about that.

She needed to focus on the project she had been asked to do, not why he was living so close to London when he barely left the house. His personal life had nothing to do with her.

Even so, Evelyn knew she would be too curious for her own good. She needed to focus. This commission was enormous. She could be set for several years with this payment should it be successful. Evelyn knew she was driven by money more than anything else but couldn't help it.

If it was just her now, she had to find a way to look after herself and the estate her father had left her. Sure, her guardian – her uncle Harold – paid the servants and let her live there while he was in his estate in Sussex, but there could come a time when Evelyn was left on her own. She had to be prepared for that, and having a nice amount of money put to one side would be ideal.

As her small carriage took her to Ashbourne's home, Evelyn wondered what he wanted the mural for. From her experience, murals were much more personal than paintings and portraits.

They had the client's personal touches to it, and it was harder to get rid of. Asking for a mural was more long-term than a painting, which could easily be destroyed. Even painting over a mural it would still be there. What did the earl want as the mural?

She would have to get some ideas from the house itself to decide what to do if the earl didn't have any ideas.

It didn't take long to get to the house, and Evelyn looked out as they went up the driveway. She didn't like to think impressive homes easily struck her, but this manor house was exquisite.

It looked like it had been built in the previous century, its appearance far newer than she anticipated. Maybe there had been a lot of renovations

recently? Evelyn would ask about that, her curiosity piqued.

It was beautiful, she had to admit that. And the grounds themselves looked marvellous. Evelyn often took walks in her own gardens and loved the expanse of color and different plants. From the brief glimpse she got, this looked like paradise to her.

The Earl of Ashbourne was incredibly lucky to have something like this. She could see why he wouldn't want to leave the estate when it looked so beautiful.

Her carriage pulled up outside the house, and her driver, Johnson, jumped down and opened the door. Evelyn gave him a smile of gratitude and got out.

“Do you want me to wait for you?” Johnson asked. “Or do you want me to come back later?”

Evelyn wasn't sure. She was about to suggest coming back later when the door opened, and a middle-aged man with broad shoulders and a thick mustache came out. He was dressed very smartly, and from his mannerisms, he was one of the servants. The butler, maybe. He approached Evelyn with a pleasant smile and bowed.

“Good morning, Miss Caldwell. My name is Stokes. The Earl of Ashbourne

wanted me to greet you on arrival.”

Evelyn smiled. Before she could get out her notebook and write her response, Johnson spoke.

“Do you wish me to come by and pick up Miss Caldwell later, Mr Stokes? Or am I permitted to wait?”

“You can wait in the stables if you like. My wife is the housekeeper and can ensure you’re fed while you wait.”

“Thank you.” Johnson nodded at Evelyn. “Let me know when you’re ready to leave, Madam.”

Then he jumped up into his seat and got the horse moving again. Evelyn watched him go before turning to Stokes. The butler smiled at her and beckoned her to follow him.

“Come with me. The earl is in the morning room. He’s looking forward to meeting you.”

Evelyn almost started signing to ask why he was looking forward to seeing

her but then remembered that Stokes wouldn't know how to sign. She would have looked like a madwoman if she did that. It would be easier to stay silent for now.

Following Stokes into the house, Evelyn gave her hat and coat to one of the footmen, and then she joined the butler at a closed door. Stokes opened it without knocking, which Evelyn found a little surprising. Surely, he would knock before entering a room, especially if his master was present.

Then she remembered that the earl couldn't hear the knocking. How could she have forgotten that so quickly? Her nerves were already getting the better of her.

The morning room was less of a room and more of a long, wide hallway. Most of it looked like any other room where guests would be entertained, while the rest was mostly bare, although Evelyn could see that the walls looked freshly painted. Was he in the process of more renovation?

A dark-haired man was pacing around near the window. He didn't stop as they entered, looking lost in his own world. Stokes walked over to him and waited until the man turned and stopped abruptly when he saw the butler there.

"Stokes!" He pressed a hand to his chest. "You startled me there."

“Forgive me, My Lord. Miss Caldwell is here.”

Stokes gestured at Evelyn, and Ashbourne looked past him. Their eyes met, and Evelyn was momentarily struck at how handsome he was. He had to be about thirty, very tall and well-built. The cut of his clothes didn't hide the fact that he was a strong individual. And his dark eyes drew her in, leaving her swaying.

Wait, what had just happened? Why was her heart racing so fast that she was feeling lightheaded? This was not normal. Evelyn wasn't sure she liked it.

With a smile that made her heart stumble, Ashbourne approached her and gave her a bow.

“Miss Caldwell. Thank you for coming here. I understand you're very busy.”

His voice sounded a little strange. It was relatively clear, easy enough to understand, but it fluctuated with the volume, going from loud to a little quieter and then to a normal voice. Evelyn could understand that he couldn't hear how loud he was talking, but he was clearly trying to control it. He seemed conscious that he might sound odd to other people.

Even deaf, he was really trying.

Then she remembered her manners. Evelyn lowered her head and curtsied, almost wobbling as her balance suddenly decided to give way. Catching herself before falling flat on her feet, Evelyn straightened up, her face getting warm, and hoping she wasn't too obvious about what just happened.

Ashbourne smiled at her. It seemed to warm the expression in his eyes. He had a really nice smile as well. Evelyn wondered how she would concentrate when this man looked at her like this.

Or when he was looking at her at all.

Chapter 3

Jonathan wasn't sure what he was expecting, but he was not expecting the fair-haired beauty who was waiting for him. She was tall, far taller than the average woman in the ton, slim and delicate with big blue eyes. She looked very put-together, almost like she could fit into Society without even trying.

Trying to maintain a conversation while not openly staring at her would be interesting. Jonathan was feeling more self-conscious about how he talked.

If only he could hear what she was saying.

"Thank you for coming." God, why was he repeating himself? He might be deaf, but even he knew he had just said that. "How was your journey? You didn't spend too long travelling, did you?"

She shook her head, still keeping her smile. That was odd. Normally, a woman would tell him that she hadn't traveled for long and the journey was fine. Was she shy? Or did she think she was going to embarrass herself?

It was rather cute, actually.

“Forgive me for asking you here,” Jonathan said slowly, hoping he wasn’t stumbling over his words. “My housekeeper said you were excellent, and the gallery owner I spoke to, Mr Savage, had nothing but high praise for you.”

She actually blushed there. What was it about her that was just so sweet? Jonathan wished he could hear her voice; it must sound beautiful.

“Has he told you much about the project? I hope you can do something, as I’m not sure what I should have. I’ve got so many ideas, but it’s difficult to tell what to do, if you know what I mean?”

Miss Caldwell held up a hand, which had Jonathan faltering. Was it the way he was speaking? Could she not understand him? He stuttered as she opened her reticule and stuck her hand inside.

“If you can’t understand me, forgive me. I am unable to hear how I say things, so it might sound strange to your ears. If you need me to speak slower ...”

Miss Caldwell had taken out a notebook and a pencil. She scribbled something on a clean page and then held it out to him. Curious, Jonathan looked at what she had written.

“I’m afraid I cannot speak. I am a mute. But I can understand you perfectly. Your speech is good.”

For a moment, his mind went blank. She was mute? But ... there didn’t seem to be anything to show that she was. She looked perfectly normal. How was that possible?

What are you talking about? You look perfectly normal, and yet you’ve lost your hearing. It looks like nothing’s wrong with you.

It’s like I’m partly in denial about what has happened to me.

“You ... you can’t speak? How is that possible? Why can’t you speak?”

Miss Caldwell shrugged and took the notebook back. Jonathan almost dropped it when their fingers brushed each other. Something shot up his arm, and his fingers were still tingling long after she pulled away. She wrote something else and passed it back.

“I don’t know why I can’t. I’ve never spoken. It’s just something that happens. Did Mr Savage not tell you that I’m mute?”

“No, he didn’t. When I contacted him about commissioning you, he was full of praise for you but he never said that you couldn’t talk.”

Miss Caldwell sighed and shook her head, taking the notebook back again. It was back in Jonathan’s hands a moment later.

“That’s no surprise. Mr Savage has known me since I was a baby and is so used to how we interact that he forgets I can’t do it with other people.”

“Ah. I see.”

How did Mrs Stokes not know about this? Was she aware? Jonathan made a mental note to ask her later. He turned and saw Stokes was still there, waiting for him to say something. At least he wouldn’t need Stokes to help him if Miss Caldwell was mute, which was a relief.

“You can go, Stokes. I think we’ll be fine here.”

“Yes, My Lord.” Stokes bowed, keeping his head up so Jonathan could see his mouth. “Would you like Mrs Stokes to bring some tea in?”

“Yes, please.”

Stokes left the room, and Jonathan felt Miss Caldwell touch his arm. He turned and saw that she was trying to get his attention. She scribbled another note.

“Forgive me for asking, but how do you cope interacting with the servants? Is it tough?”

Jonathan should have felt a little offended, but he could see the genuine curiosity in her expression.

“It was tough in the beginning, but I learned to read lips. I can cope if I can see the person’s face and they don’t speak too fast. Stokes translates for me if necessary.” He managed a smile. “I will apologize now if I suddenly speak louder and hurt your ears. I can’t tell if I am speaking louder or not.”

Miss Caldwell gave him a smile in return, although Jonathan wished that he didn’t have to wait for her to write a response. It felt like it was stalling the conversation. At least she had legible handwriting.

“I can manage. As long as you can manage me writing my responses all the time. I’m afraid I won’t be making the conversation move smoothly, but there isn’t much of an option.”

“Can you communicate differently? How do you interact with Mr Savage?”

“I sign. There is sign language, and Mr Savage knows it. His daughter is also mute, so it’s as easy as speaking to him.”

There was sign language for those who couldn’t speak? Interesting. Jonathan had never heard about that before. Maybe he should learn more about that. Then it would be easier to communicate with Miss Caldwell.

“Shall we sit?” He gestured at the settee. “Forgive the sight of the room. The wall was knocked down a couple of years ago when I was going through renovations, and I never got around to dealing with the actual changes. I was ... occupied.”

“You were away being a soldier,” Miss Caldwell wrote. “I understand. Life always gets in the way.” She sat, putting her reticule to one side. That seemed to make her write faster. “Why did you choose me for this commission? What made me stand out?”

“I asked my housekeeper if she knew anyone who could make a mural along that wall.” Jonathan gestured at the blank wall freshly painted. “Once the walls are done, I’m going to get more furniture to make it look less like a hole in the house.”

“I see.” Miss Caldwell tapped her pencil against her notebook for a moment. “It looks like it was meant to be a ballroom. Don’t you want to keep it like that?”

“No, I don’t.” Jonathan’s response was immediate. “With how I am, I very much doubt that I will be having any social gatherings anytime soon. Why would I need a ballroom?”

He guessed he had raised his voice because Miss Caldwell frowned at him. Jonathan swallowed.

“Forgive me, I didn’t mean to ...”

“It’s fine.” She held up the notebook. “I understand completely. These things are frustrating when you’re not used to it.”

At least she was considerate of him. Jonathan was surprised that there was no significant ringing in his ears. There was a vague hum, but he had figured out a while ago that it was because he was speaking and aware of the vibration through his body. But because Miss Caldwell was not speaking, there was no ringing. It was surprisingly pleasant.

“Who did you say recommended me?” Miss Caldwell asked. “You said your housekeeper, yes?”

“Yes. Mrs Stokes mentioned being to a viewing at Mr Savage’s gallery and loved your work.”

“I remember her. Mr Savage said she asked a lot of questions and was genuinely interested. She praised me a lot.”

“You didn’t meet her yourself?”

Miss Caldwell shook her head.

“I barely leave the house. You can understand why. It’s very difficult to communicate with those who don’t understand what is wrong with me. I’ve been treated badly in the past.”

Jonathan couldn’t comprehend why anyone would be so rude to Miss Caldwell. She was such a sweet person, so kind. And pretty, too.

What did that have to do with anything?

“People aren’t kind to you about being mute?”

“It’s not considered normal. People treat me like I’m a massive inconvenience.” Miss Caldwell shrugged as she wrote. “It’s why I withdrew from Society shortly after my father died. It didn’t matter that I was a baron’s daughter; I was defective and not considered worthy of anyone’s attention.”

“A baron’s daughter?”

“My father is George Caldwell, Baron Stillwell.”

Jonathan had heard of Baron Stillwell. He had been a wealthy landowner and generous benefactor. He’d had a family later in life and became a father at sixty. He passed away five years ago. And Miss Caldwell was his daughter? How had Jonathan not figured it out? And how had he not heard about the baron’s daughter being mute?

Then again, he had been very involved with the war in France. Jonathan had barely been back in England before he went off again. Anything beyond names went in one ear and out the other.

Nothing was getting in his ears anymore.

“I heard he passed away some time ago. Please accept my condolences.”

“You don’t need to do that. It was a long time ago.” Miss Caldwell’s smile was a little sad. “I’ve made my peace with it.”

“Even so ...”

Miss Caldwell held up a hand, and Jonathan waited as she wrote again. He had thought the silence would be more stifling than normal, with their conversations stilted due to her scribbling. But it was actually quite nice. There was no pressure to talk or more time to think of his potential responses. She passed the notebook back.

“I have been managing without too many problems since Father passed. And I’m coping well enough. Thank you for your condolences, but you don’t need to offer it.”

Now Jonathan wasn’t sure what to say. He wondered if he had forgotten how to engage in conversation with a woman. It had been a while since he had spoken to someone who wasn’t one of the servants. Miss Caldwell seemed to know that, though, as she took the notebook back.

“What would you like for the mural? Do you have any ideas?”

Evelyn tore off another sketchbook page and laid it on the floor. She had been sitting on the floor for the last couple of hours. Spread around her were sketches and images of what Colonel Russell wanted on the mural. He paced around the room, inspecting each of the sketches and then making other suggestions. It was like he was back in the army again with how he held himself and spoke.

He had also been insistent on being called Colonel Russell. Even though he had been the Earl of Ashbourne longer, he preferred the army title. Evelyn didn't mind; either way was fine for her. She just needed a name so she wasn't sitting there floundering.

Finding out that he was deaf had actually worked out for her, oddly enough. Evelyn could communicate with her writing, and he was very patient with her. His voice went up and down a little, but he seemed to cope well enough. When Mrs Stokes had come in with the tea tray, he had been completely focused on the woman while the housekeeper spoke clearly and concisely, much like her husband. It was quite nice to see how kind his household staff were.

If an outsider had seen them like that, nobody would have known he was

deaf. Evelyn felt some sympathy for him. To go through that and lose something he took for granted had to be horrible. She had always been mute, so she had never taken speech for granted.

She could make noises – she could laugh, and Evelyn knew she could scream – but when it came to talking, that wasn't happening. Nobody knew why she couldn't speak, although many people thought she chose not to and was stupid.

Evelyn was annoyed when people thought that about her, but she couldn't change their minds. They could be close-minded as much as they wanted. She was healthy besides not speaking, and she was intelligent. That was enough for her.

She was sure Colonel Russell would be able to cope himself. A part of him was clearly in denial that he had lost his hearing, but he was doing his best to get through it. He was very frustrated about it, and Evelyn could see it bubbling under the surface when his voice sounded strained, or he started talking louder. The volume of his voice went up and down quite a bit.

She wished that she could help him. She understood, more than anyone else, how it felt not to be completely 'normal', as people would call it when they weren't calling it a disability or something worse. Evelyn saw herself as normal, but very few thought that. They were the patient few.

Society and members of the ton were certainly not patient.

“These look really good.” Colonel Russell picked up one of the pictures and studied it. “You’re going to make it colorful, aren’t you? Make it stand out while still making it look like part of the wall.”

“Yes,” Evelyn signed. “That is not going to be a problem.”

He frowned at her, and Evelyn realized what she had done. Biting her lip, she found her notebook and scribbled down her response.

“Forgive me. When I’m excited, I tend to start signing. It’s easier for me as I don’t want to stop the flow.”

Colonel Russell sighed.

“Ah. I see. Forgive me for slowing the flow.”

Evelyn held up a hand and smiled to show she was fine with it. Colonel Russell passed the notebook back, and Evelyn tried to ignore that their fingers had brushed against each other.

“Is it hard to sign? Or is it easy to pick up?”

“It’s easy for me now, as it’s all I’ve ever known. With someone who can hear, it can take some time to get used to using hands instead of their mouths.” Evelyn tapped her pencil on the notebook before continuing, “If you have the determination and want to make the effort, it’s easy enough to pick up.”

“I see.” Colonel Russell crouched down on his haunches and regarded her thoughtfully. “Do you ever wish you could talk? Do you think things would be easier if you could speak?”

Evelyn shook her head.

“Not really. It’s all I’ve ever known. And it wouldn’t be that useful right now, would it?”

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