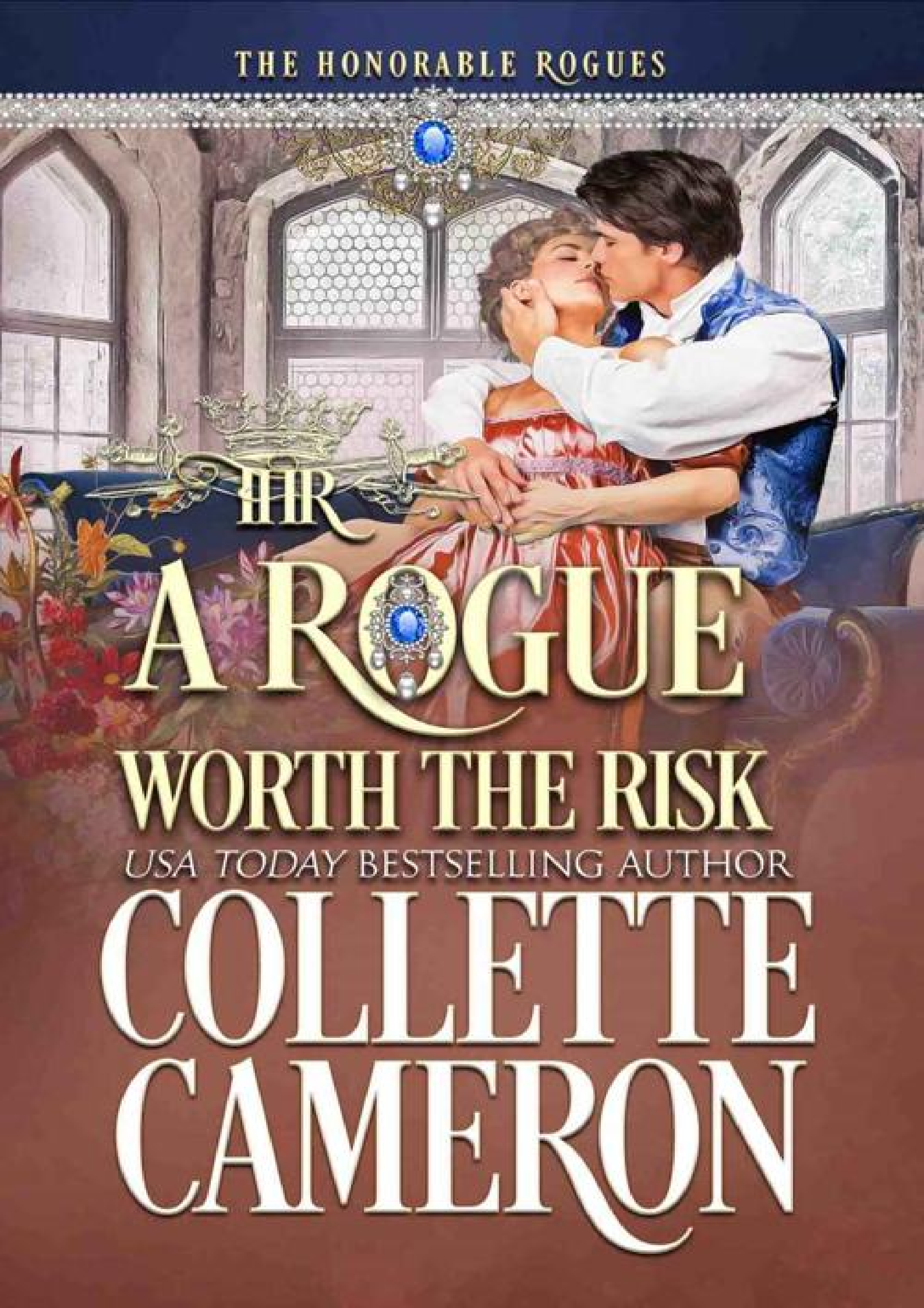


THE HONORABLE ROGUES



III
A ROGUE

WORTH THE RISK

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

COLLETTTE
CAMERON

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A ROGUE WORTH THE RISK

**A Sweet Regency Historical
Romance**

The Honorable Rogues[®], Book Eight

By

COLLETTE CAMERON

Blue Rose Romance[®]

Sweet-to-Spicy Timeless Romance[®]



“I’m rarely impulsive, my lord.”

The impish glint in those remarkable blue eyes and tipping the pink petals of her full mouth upward shouted otherwise.

“Why do I find that difficult to believe?” he asked dryly.

A ROGUE WORTH THE RISK

The Honorable Rogues®

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Dedication

A decorative flourish consisting of symmetrical scrollwork and floral motifs, centered below the word "Dedication".

For every reader who considers books their best friends.
Their cats and dogs too.



Essex, England

Nottingshire Court

Home of Lady Pandora Osborne

Middle of January — Evening

I shouldn't have come.

This was a monumental mistake. A sodding, imbecilic, bloody mistake.

Putting two fingers to the jagged scar zigzagging across his left cheek, Caspian Graystone, Baron Strathmore—called the blackhearted baron behind his back and occasionally to his face—paused inside the ballroom's glittering entrance.

Why had he allowed Ronan Brockman and Manchester, Marquess of Sterling, to talk him into attending what was certain to be a week-long, excruciatingly tedious pain in the posterior? Cynicism bent Caspian's mouth upward, and anyone glancing in his direction would recognize him for what he was—a jaded, sardonic skeptic.

Elegantly coiffed ladies draped in sparkling jewels and swathed in silks and satins in every shade of the rainbow twirled around the chalked parquet dance floor with gentlemen attired in the first stare of fashion.

Pretentious popinjays and conceited coxcombs, the lot.

Nay, not all of the fellows.

According to Brockman, a few other sensible chaps made the coveted guest list, though how Brockman came by that exclusive information was anyone's guess. The Earls of Hythe, Bixley, and Barington, as well as Viscounts Harcourt, Silverton, and the Duke of Sedgewick were expected. Whether

the lords chose to subject themselves to this gratuitous torment or not, however...

They were the only thing that kept Caspian from turning on his heel and sequestering himself for the evening in the study or library with a bottle of prime scotch. Mayhap not a bottle, but a dram or two.

In truth, the notion tempted greatly.

Though an aristocrat by birthright, Caspian didn't belong here—didn't belong amongst *le beau monde*. The *ton* had made that perfectly clear six years ago. Regardless, he'd made his friends a promise, and if nothing else—despite the smudges upon his dented reputation—Caspian was a man of his word.

In point of fact, just appearing tonight would suffice as the fulfillment of his pledge to attend the house party. No need to torture himself and stay more than a day or two.

Besides, he preferred to monitor Thirkwick Park's reconstruction progress himself. He'd far rather be there laying bricks, hoisting lumber, nailing flooring, or performing any number of other tasks required to rebuild the once-magnificent manor that had sustained grievous fire damage.

The very inferno Caspian had escaped by diving through an upper-story window—hence his scarred face and arm. The blaze had also taken the lives of his entire family: father, brother, pregnant sister-in-law, and demented stepmother, Florinda. Caspian would go to his grave convinced Florinda had set the fire in one of her frequent and ever more irrational frenzies.

With pure determination, he took a firm grip on his memory and veered his disquieting musings from that fateful night. With bored disinterest, he surveyed the festive tableau before him. The merest pinch of a headache throbbed behind his eyes as it inevitably did when he entertained recollections of the deadly conflagration that had left him alone in the world.

The fire that had also left Caspian a pariah to Society.

In an effort to ease the aggravating ache prodding his skull, Caspian rubbed the bridge of his nose. He stopped as two ladies passed, their eyes widening in recognition, before they dipped their graying heads together. The feathers in their silk

turbans battled for dominance in a comical duel as the women broke into frenetic whispers.

Indulging the wicked urge to take them down a peg, Caspian gave them a devilish wink and skewed his mouth into a mocking grin. He knew full well that his scar pulled his mouth into a cockeyed, rather macabre grimace. More than one child had broken into frightened cries when he'd smiled at them.

So he'd stopped doing so.

He might be a monster in appearance but wasn't so in character. Unless one counted cynicism and taciturnity as character flaws.

Clutching one another's arms in alarm, the be-ribboned and be-ruffled dames practically fell over each other in their haste to put distance between him and them. It would serve the biddies right if they toppled, ample bosoms over even ampler bums, onto the dance floor.

Though he was loath to admit it, the encounter bothered Caspian more than it ought. Hadn't his pride been bludgeoned enough? Why put himself through this farce?

He searched the teeming ballroom for a single friend. He hadn't many left, truth be told. Merely a handful of loyal men who valued character over rumors. Friendship over titillating tattle. Who believed him and not the embellished gossip still circulating certain elite drawing rooms.

To be perfectly honest, the invitation to attend Lady Pandora Osborne's house party had taken him aback. They didn't travel in the same social circles, although she had been a close friend of his mother's many long years ago.

Perhaps pity or a misguided sense of obligation had spurred her to include Caspian. A perverted sense of curiosity or anticipation his presence would liven up an otherwise predictable gathering weren't farfetched motivations either.

In retrospect, the latter two were the more likely possibilities.

Barely suppressing a peeved sigh, Caspian pulled his watch from his pocket.

Not even ten of the clock yet.

Where was Brockman? Sterling?

Had they deserted him this early on?

Caspian skimmed his gaze across the crowd again. Hundreds of candles in the crystal chandeliers cast an ethereal glow onto the guests, creating a fairytale-like atmosphere.

Fairytale?

Balderdash and twaddle.

He'd put aside fanciful childish notions twenty years ago. When his invalid mother had died, and Father had married Florinda—the unbalanced mistress he'd unabashedly flaunted—less than a fortnight later.

There wasn't anything magical or mystical about the people gathered at Lady Osborne's ostentatious manor house. With few exceptions, the guests were shopping the Marriage Mart, hunting matrimonial prey, or intent on engaging in a clandestine assignation—perchance more than one naughty tryst.

A derisive snort escaped Caspian.

Heaven save him from such obvious machinations.

The bachelor's life suited him very well.

Very well, indeed, thank you.

He felt no pressing need to sire an heir—no need at all, in point of fact. As the second son, that task wasn't ever to have been his responsibility. Which was why—even as the barony's heir—he'd never entertained notions of marching down the aisle and voluntarily relinquishing his freedom for matrimonial imprisonment.

“Ah, there you are, Strathmore.”

A sharp swat to his arm brought his attention to the formidable lady attired in black whose silent approach he'd missed.

His daunting hostess.

“I didn't believe you'd actually come.” Lady Pandora Osborne, Pansy to her closest friends, scraped a probing gaze over him through her lorgnette. “Although Sterling assured me you would.”

“My lady.” Caspian dutifully bent into a bow. “A delight.”

Though the silver curls artfully arranged upon her noble head scarcely reached Caspian’s shoulders, Lady Osborne was a force to be reckoned with. A veritable dervish when she put her mind to something. Her ladyship was also the *ton’s* most prestigious unofficial matchmaker and was renowned for her brilliant matches.

An aptitude she took tremendous pride in.

Toying with the lace edging her hand-painted fan, she eyed him critically then gave an approving nod.

Evidently, Caspian had measured up. To what, he wasn’t certain.

“You clean up well, Strathmore. Black suits you.”

What else would the Blackhearted Baron wear?

Lady Osborne artfully swept a hand from her neck to waist. “I favor the shade myself.”

Neither apologetic nor contrite, she shifted her bold scrutiny to his disfigured face, and Caspian raised a sardonic eyebrow.

“Even with that scar.” She pointed her fan at his disfigured cheek. “You’re more handsome than either your brother or father were.”

“High praise indeed from one as estimable as yourself, my lady.”

“Pshaw. Poppycock.” She cut him a teasing glance, humor twinkling in her eyes. “Don’t waste your glib tongue on me, rascalion.”

Her gaze took on a cunning gleam, and Caspian had the distinct impression she was up to something. Something he wasn’t going to like.

“There are plenty of young ladies who would swoon for an opportunity to dance with you tonight, Strathmore.”



And there it was.

Her ladyship's subtle-as-a-purple-pig-in-a-chartreuse-bonnet hint.

Caspian chuckled.

"Now who has the glib tongue? You know as well as I that my—ah—reputation precedes me." He jutted his chin in the direction beyond her shoulders. "Even now, the protective mamas are herding their precious darlings to the other side of the ballroom."

A jot of vexation etched Lady Osborne's countenance as she turned, lifted her lorgnette, and glared through the glass.

"Hmph." Sliding her hand into the crook of Caspian's elbow, she gave him a gimlet eye. "Never mind those bird wits. None can discuss anything more complex than embroidery stitches or ribbon colors."

She wasn't wrong.

Lady Osborne paused for a heartbeat, then snapped her fan open and waved it before her face. "Just for the record, Strathmore, I never entertained the balderdash that you set the fire so you could inherit."

"I thank you for faith in me, my lady."

Her straightforward confession not only took Caspian by surprise but caused something warm to unfurl in his chest. She was one of a scant few who held that opinion. Regardless, her confidence in him provided a balm to his bruised and bloodied soul.

"Oh, tosh." She stopped fanning herself and gave him an arch stare. "Anyone who puts credence in gossip is a totty-headed bacon brain."

Most wouldn't agree with her assessment because often, there was a tiny thread of truth buried in rumors and tattle. In Caspian's case, there had been an ugly row between him and his father earlier in the evening. Florinda's behavior had become so bizarre, so maniacal, Caspian fretted for the family's safety.

As it turned out, he'd had good cause for concern.

She'd tried to kill them all. At least that was what Caspian believed and what the evidence pointed toward.

Lady Osborne's expression turned crafty, and Caspian's appreciation disintegrated as speedily as a water droplet upon a blazing log.

"I have someone I want you to meet, Strathmore."

Aha. Her ladyship *was* up to something.

"No. I think not."

Though it was impolite, and she was his hostess, Caspian shook his head. He softened his rejection with a roguish wink and shook his finger.

"You'll not find me an easy mark for your matchmaking, my lady. I have no interest in becoming leg-shackled."

If memory served, the convoluted Graystone family tree contained two or three legitimate distant cousins who would gladly inherit the barony. Several illegitimate relatives also perched amongst the branches, but primogeniture prevented them from claiming the title.

"Flim-flam." Tutting, Lady Osborne gave him a playful scowl. "Who said anything about the parson's mousetrap?"

"Your reputation precedes *you* as well, Lady Osborne. Your matchmaking shenanigans are touted far and wide amongst *le beau monde*."

"I shall take that as a compliment." She preened with self-satisfaction as she took in her guests. "Though I'm not certain your remark was intended as such."

With a last futile glance around, hoping to spy a friend to rescue him, Caspian rolled his shoulder. Might as well let her think she'd won this round. He'd make his excuses soon

enough and find that quiet retreat to savor a superior finger's worth of spirits.

"As you wish, my lady." With a wry smile and a mental shrug, he acquiesced. "Providence does not appear to favor me this evening."

"I wouldn't be so swift to decry Providence, Strathmore."

An entirely too-pleased-with-herself smile tipped Lady Osborne's mouth upward as he permitted her to guide him from the throng.

They hadn't traveled more than twenty feet along the corridor before a dark-paneled door sprang open, and a feminine blur of blue satin and white lace flew forth, crashing into Caspian. He inhaled a whiff of honeysuckle and almond before his assaulter's pointed elbow landed squarely in his midriff.

"Oomph."

He instinctively reached to steady the woman by gripping her upper arms. She was fine-boned but not willowy thin, nor was she plump.

Tottering unsteadily, a halo of ash-blond curls tumbling about her shoulders, she lifted the palest hydrangea-blue eyes he'd ever seen to meet his. Her bow-shaped mouth parted.

In shock? Surprise? Dread?

Instead of gratitude that he'd prevented her from falling, furious blue sparks spewed from eyes framed by unexpectedly dark and lush eyelashes.

"Let me go," she hissed, sending a frantic glance into the room she'd just vacated.

She wriggled her way free of Caspian's grasp, and before either he or Lady Osborne could utter a word, the young woman hoisted her skirts to mid-calf and sprinted down the corridor.

Despite himself, Caspian couldn't help but appreciate her finely turned ankles and calves.

A couple of seconds later, a gentleman emerged, holding a bloodied handkerchief to his nose. He paused midstep, obviously put off his stride by finding two people standing

outside the door. His blurry-eyed gaze swung from Lady Osborne to Caspian and back to her ladyship.

“My lady.”

The aroma of strong spirits wafted from him.

The sot wavered on his feet, well into his cups despite the relative earliness of the evening.

“Parnell-Calloway.” Lady Osborne raised her lorgnette and gave him an imperious, arctic stare.

Caspian almost felt sorry for the chap.

“Beg your pardon,” Parnel-Calloway mumbled in a muffled, nasally tone, still pressing the cloth to his nose.

“Walked—erm—into a wall.”

The man was a wretched liar.

“And I’m a dancing poodle wearing a tiara,” her ladyship scoffed.

The tips of his ears a shade somewhere between purple and red, Parnell-Calloway trundled off in the opposite direction the woman in blue had flown.

A forefinger to her chin, Lady Osborne narrowed her eyes in shrewd consideration. “He’s a pished rakehell to his marrow.”

Caspian couldn’t disagree with her assessment.

“Is he worth the effort?” she muttered to herself.

Effort?

She tapped her finger twice on her chin. “Might be irredeemable.”

“Many of us are,” Caspian put in dryly.

“We shall see.” Lady Osborne tilted her head, a mischievous gleam in her eyes. She looked past him with what might have been a hint of admiration. “I’d wager my grandmother’s tiara that gel planted him a well-deserved facer. And the glower she gave you was meant to smite you to ashes.”

Now she sounded positively giddy.

When Caspian glanced over his shoulder, Lady Osborne burst into laughter.

There was no sign of the tornado in petticoats. The crowd had swallowed her up.

Don't ask. Do not ask.

Despite himself and the obvious glee his hostess exhibited at his interest, he asked, "Who is she?"

"That, Strathmore, was Miss Corinna Brockman. A hellion and spitfire wrapped into one unpredictable, incorrigible, unladylike, wholly unsuitable bundle." She swept her mouth into a satisfied smile. "And the very person *I* wanted you to meet."



Ten minutes later in the ladies' retiring room

Cheeks rosy with anger and humiliation, Corinna stabbed a pin into the haphazard knot she'd twisted her hair into. A frown drew her eyebrows together as she examined her work.

Awful.

A child could do better.

Bah.

She was hopeless at this sort of thing. Betsy normally arranged her hair, and Corinna tied the mass back with a ribbon when the maid couldn't. However, that uncomplicated style would not suffice for Lady Pandora Osborne's ball.

Nor did Corinna wish to explain why the lovely chignon interweaved with a beaded blue ribbon half an hour ago was now a sloppy, lopsided mess. Wrestling free of and punching a drunkard had that unfortunate effect on one's coiffure.

God only knew where the ribbon had landed when she'd clocked Parnell-Calloway. How many people had seen her tumbled-down hair as she all but sprinted upstairs?

She could always fib and say the pins came loose, but she despised lying.

Corinna knew her shortcomings well, and there were many, but she was not a liar.

Unlike the pair who had set her up for ruination.

A fresh surge of outrage thrummed through Corinna. Fisting her hands, she shook her head. Several newly pinned locks flopped loose.

"Ooohhh."

An unladylike, animalistic growl escaped her clenched teeth.

How could she have been so gullible?

So naive? Stupid? Such a pudding head?

She had no one to blame but herself for trusting Adelpia Haywood and Doretta Marchette. When they told her Mercy had taken ill in the library and had asked for Corinna, she'd gone to her new sister-in-law straightaway. If Corinna didn't suspect Mercy was with child, she'd never have walked into the trap the pair of spiteful snits had set.

That libertine Timothy Parnell-Calloway had been waiting and tried to steal a kiss. For over a month, Corinna had avoided him and his unwanted attentions. He was worse than a love-struck pup. She had never encouraged him, but the man would not be dissuaded.

Adelpia had lied through her crooked teeth and assured Parnell-Calloway that Corinna would welcome his advances. Corinna had shown him otherwise—succinctly and inarguably.

Grinning, she flexed her hand. Other than a slight bruising of her middle finger knuckle, she'd come through the fray unharmed—except for an inopportune encounter with Lady Osborne and that gentleman with the scarred face.

Even in her haste, she'd noticed the puckered flesh lashing his left cheek. It gave him a debonair but also warrior-like appearance.

Unfortunately, he and her ladyship had seen Corinna's state of disarray. The worry was, would either blather about it? Not that Corinna gave two farthings about herself and what others thought of her. It was Mercy she fretted for. A former governess, Mercy had endured snubs and cuts for daring to marry into the peerage.

Corinna, for one, was very glad she had.

A flash of deep-set amber-brown eyes set beneath striking eyebrows intruded upon her reflections. There'd been pain and defeat in the depths of the scarred man's eyes—humor and gentleness too. And if she wasn't mistaken, concern for her had radiated from the depths of his guarded gaze.

Who was he, that man she'd plowed into?

She'd met Lady Osborne on numerous occasions, and Corinna knew she didn't measure up to the infamous peeress's standards of propriety. Come to think of it, a good many of this house party's guests did not.

Most peculiar, that.

What Corinna wouldn't have given to see Lady Osborne's and the gentleman's expressions when Parnell-Calloway exited the library with a bloody nose.

The retiring room door swung open, and Mercy slipped inside.

"There you are. I became worried when I couldn't find you." Perplexion swiftly followed by concern flitted across her pretty face. "Corinna. Your hair..."

Oh, bother.

Mercy met Corinna's chagrined gaze in the mirror. "Sit down, and I shall fix it while you tell me what has happened."

Sighing, Corinna sank onto one of the gold and ivory striped seats. As briefly as possible, she explained her unpleasant encounter.

"It's my own fault." She gave a disconcerted shrug and pulled her right glove on. *Drat*. Several small flecks of blood dotted the ivory satin. Likely they were ruined. "Not the most ideal way to begin a house party."

Mercy stepped back and examined her handiwork. She adjusted a curl then gave a satisfied nod.

"I say good for you."

"You do?" Relief and gratitude suffused Corinna as she tugged on the other glove.

Mercy gave Corinna's shoulders an encouraging squeeze. "Women need to defend themselves against the likes of that bounder." Mischief narrowed her eyes, and she chuckled. "I daresay Parnell-Calloway will finally accept your disinterest in him now."

"You knew?" Corinna's gaze flew to her sister-in-law's as she stood.

A gentle smile swept Mercy's mouth upward. "He's besotted. Men do stupid things when smitten. As unacceptable

as his behavior was, Parnell-Calloway was as much a victim of the cruel prank as you.”

“That is true.” Corinna touched Mercy’s arm. “Don’t tell Ronan, please. He’s likely to do something brash in my defense.”

“I shan’t say anything unless he asks me directly.” Mercy’s pretty features crumpled into a frown. “I’ve half a mind to inform Miss Marchette’s and Miss Haywood’s parents of their daughters’ reprehensible behavior.”

“I honestly don’t believe they’d give two farthings.” The girls weren’t the spoiled, unkind misses they were for no reason. “Rotten fruit doesn’t fall far from the tree when it comes to the Marchettes and Haywoods.”

Corinna gave Mercy a hug. “Thank you for fixing my hair. I’m rather hopeless at styling it.”

Mercy looped her hand through Corinna’s elbow. “You have other talents.”

“That is kind of you to say so.” Corinna twisted her mouth into a wry grin. “Regardless, I don’t think my fascination with architecture, ancient writing, or herbal medicines ranks high on the list of desirable wifely attributes.”

Mercy cocked her head, her expression interested but not prying. “I didn’t think you were overly interested in matrimony.”

“I’m not, *per se*.” At least not a typical *haut ton* match.

They stepped through the doorframe onto the Axminster carpet. Candles flickered in the numerous brass and crystal wall sconces lining the corridor between ornately framed landscape paintings.

“I’m not opposed to the institution itself. You and Ronan are a lovely example of a successful union.” Corinna shut the door. “However, I shan’t be a chattel to any man. I’d have to respect my husband, and he’d have to respect me and my values and interests. That doesn’t necessarily mean he has to be a pious teetotaler, either.”

“In other words, he can be a rascal or a rogue, but he had better be worth the risk?” Mercy teased.

“Precisely.” Corinna’s grin mirrored her sister-in-law’s.

“Perfectly reasonable.” Mercy steered them toward a balcony, festooned with ruby-toned velvet draperies tied back with thick gold cords, that overlooked the dance floor. “Marriage must be a partnership where each party wants what is best for the other and is willing to make sacrifices.”

Corinna stepped into the enclosure.

The small area might’ve been used as a minstrel’s gallery, but tonight the musicians were situated at the front of the ostentatious ballroom.

Hands resting on the polished rosewood balustrade, Mercy searched the guests below.

Corinna had no doubt she looked for her husband.

“I honestly never expected to marry. But when I met Ronan...” A giggle escaped Mercy, and she sent Corinna a sideways glance. “Actually, I abhorred him when we first met. He was awful. But when I allowed myself to know him, *really* know him, I fell in love.”

Ronan and Mercy were so in love that it was embarrassing. So were Benjamin and his wife, Isadora. Only Sanford, their eldest and the most taciturn brother, remained unmarried. In truth, he heartily disapproved of Ronan’s and Benjamin’s choice of brides. In his arrogant opinion, both were too unrefined and common.

“And I am very glad you did.” Corinna placed her hand upon Mercy’s and squeezed.

Mercy slipped an arm around Corinna’s waist and returned her focus to the crowd. She spotted Ronan speaking to a gentleman with his back to the balcony. A smile blossomed across Mercy’s radiant face, and she greeted her husband with a little flicker of her fingers.

Grinning like a love-struck fool, Ronan gave an unabashed wave back. He pointed to the guests engaged in a cotillion and skewed his eyebrow up his forehead in a silent invitation to dance.

Mercy nodded.

Not quite as tall as Ronan, the nobleman attired in black from his jacket to his shoes glanced over his shoulder to where Ronan peered.

It was him.

The man she'd bowled into while fleeing the library.

His amber eyes collided with Corinna's, and his sculpted mouth slowly curved into a roguish smile.

Heat skated up her cheeks even as her tummy quivered, but she didn't look away—couldn't look away. It wasn't a macabre fascination with his scar or his rugged handsomeness.

No, something in his eyes sparked an indefinable recognition within her.

His eyes widened slightly before he gave the dancers a pointed glance and then, grinning, met her gaze again, a distinct question in his.

Had he just...?

Was he asking her to dance?

Did he seriously think she would agree when they hadn't even met?

Well, been officially introduced?

And why, for all the tea in England, did the prospect of meeting him make her slightly giddy? When had a cadence of numerous drums begun echoing between her ears? At last, cobbling her thoughts together, she asked, "Mercy, who is that man with Ronan?"

"I don't know. I've not met him." Mercy gave her a rather sly smile and slid her gaze to the men.

The stranger still gazed upward like a demented Romeo.

Corinna wasn't certain whether to be flattered or disturbed.

"I'm positive that can be remedied if *you* so wish, Corinna."

Did Corinna wish?

Only to thank the gentleman for keeping her from taking a tumble after she'd plowed into him. Nothing more. Especially since other guests had begun to take note of his regard and were also stealing glances upward.

Corinna retreated a step. "He's the man I ran into when I fled Parnell-Calloway."

"Ah, I see."

Something in Mercy's tone made Corinna suspicious.

"Don't get any ideas, Mercy."

Lady Osborne was an infamous matchmaker. Corinna didn't need her sister-in-law—no matter how beloved—to trundle along that same problematic path. How many times had some well-meaning person, including her parents, introduced her to someone hoping she'd finally marry?

For pity's sake. Corinna wasn't that long in the tooth.

"He simply kept me from taking a fall," she reiterated.

Then why had her ribs felt like wings beat behind them when she'd glanced down, and he'd turned to stare up at her?

Didn't he know it was rude to gawk?

Could he...?

Did he feel the same inexplicable pull as she?

Her expression the epitome of innocence, Mercy slid the men a speculative glance. "Shall we go—"

"*Hiding*, Miss Brockman?"

Doretta Marchette's sing-song voice intruded, as unpleasant as rotten fish for supper.

Corinna didn't need to turn around to know Adelpia Haywood and her co-nemesis stood behind her in their nearly identical virginal gowns.

The innocent white fabric couldn't disguise their black hearts, which was why the two were unpopular amongst the *ton* despite their influential families' wealth and blue blood. Had they been kinder or more genial rather than mean-spirited gossips, they might've been saved the stigma of being wallflowers.

Corinna swallowed the sharp scold rising to her tongue. She would not give them the satisfaction.

"Whyever would I be hiding?" Corinna turned, schooling her features into a neutral expression though she'd rather have slapped the smug expressions from their faces.

Both looked sorely disappointed to see Corinna hale and hearty rather than disheveled or set upon.

“I was merely waving at my next dance partner.” A small white lie she’d repent of later. She looped her arm through Mercy’s. “Come, the men await us below.”

“Indeed, they do,” Mercy readily agreed with a frosty glare at Adelpia and Doretta.

Corinna summoned a sweet smile, knowing the answer before she asked and also knowing it wasn’t her kindest moment. But in her experience, bullies never responded to reason or kindness, nor did they like getting a taste of their own medicine.

“Don’t *you* have partners for the next set?”



Look away, you beef-witted numbskull.

Two young ladies entered the balcony, and Miss Brockman and Mrs. Brockman turned in their direction. Breathing a sigh of relief, Caspian sent a covert glance around, hoping no one had noticed his gaping.

People had, including Brockman.

Brockman cocked a derisive brow but tactfully refrained from pointing out the obvious.

Caspian *had* been staring at Miss Brockman like a wet-behind-the-ears milksop. *He* did not gape at women. Especially young marriage-minded misses who bloodied men's noses.

He'd meant to seek out that coveted quiet spot until supper but instead, after excusing himself from his highly amused hostess, went searching for Brockman.

What prompted Caspian to do so, he refused to examine.

Certainly not a desire to wangle an introduction to his friend's sister.

He opened his mouth to tell Brockman of the incident with Parnell-Calloway, then thought better of it. If Miss Corinna Brockman wanted her brother to know she popped a fellow's cork, she'd tell him. Caspian would seem a tattlemonger should he spread the tale, and he didn't want her thinking ill of him.

Why?

She'd soon learn of his reputation—the dark accusation that he'd killed his family for the title. There was not a whit of truth in the speculation, but fabricated twaddle was far more titillating than reality.

“You wanted to say something, Strathmore?” Brockman took a sip of his champagne.

“I... Umm, I...” Caspian swore inwardly. He was making a hash of this, stuttering like an imbecile. “I would like to ask your sister to dance but need an introduction first.”

Brockman gave him a long, measured look before finishing off his champagne and relinquishing the flute to a passing footman. “May I ask why?”

Why?

Caspian didn't know why.

Because Corinna Brockman intrigued him?

She hadn't averted her gaze from his scar?

She dared give a churl a facer for being too forward?

Because just now, she had met his gaze unflinching but not wantonly?

Pinching his nose for a second, Caspian gave a sheepish grin. “Because not many women are willing to partner me. I supposed your sister might be molded from the same character as you and wouldn't pass judgment without knowing all of the facts.”

Brockman's features softened, and he slapped Caspian's shoulders. “Be warned, my friend. Corinna is not your typical miss. She's unique, headstrong, and has an unswayable sense of justice. She's endured much criticism and ridicule for her independent ways and thinking.”

The esteem Brockman held for his sister colored his voice and softened his features.

“Yet you admire her for those very things?” From the corner of his eye, Caspian caught three stuffy gentlemen observing him. None wore polite or welcoming expressions.

They regarded him as an intruder—someone unfit for their prestigious company. Well, they could kiss his... *erm*. They could take their self-righteousness and choke on it.

God knew the truth. Brockman and a few others did too.

That was enough for Caspian.

“I do admire Corinna’s intrepidity.” Brockman nodded and scratched his chin. “I confess, however, I don’t always agree with her methods.”

Perhaps, as an outsider herself, Miss Brockman might empathize with Caspian’s plight. Maybe that was why he’d sensed an immediate connection with her.

“Don’t do anything I’ll make you regret.” Though Brockman’s tenor was friendly, an unmistakable thread of flint edged his words and the contours of his face hardened.

“I shan’t.” Ruining an old friendship was not Caspian’s plan. He had too few remaining friends to lose any more. “I give you my word.”

“That’s enough for me. Ah, here is my enchanting bride.” Brockman broke into an exuberant smile. “And my delightful sister.”

Fighting unexpected nerves, Caspian faced the women.

Across the ballroom, Lady Osborne regarded him with something more than casual interest. Her penetrating gaze drifted to Miss Brockman, and she said something to her cousin, Lady Octavia Sewell standing beside her.

Lady Sewell’s face screwed into a disapproving frown before, nose pointed ceilingward, she sailed away from her smiling—*gloating?*—cousin.

Brockman swiftly made the introductions, and Caspian bowed to the Brockman women.

“It’s my pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Brockman held his arm out, and his beaming wife laid her hand atop his forearm. “Darling, may I have the honor of the next dance?”

“Of course.” She gave Miss Brockman a little wave as her besotted husband led her onto the dance floor.

Aware of the many inquisitive and a few critical gazes pointed in his and Miss Brockman’s direction, Caspian battled whether to ask her to dance or escape into that coveted private retreat.

You cannot keep hiding.

It makes you look all the more guilty.

No small amount of truth there.

“Thank you for preventing me from falling earlier this evening, my lord. I am not usually so clumsy.” Miss Brockman gave him a winsome smile, mirth shining in her eyes. “Nor do I normally dart about with my hair down and my skirts up.”

Caspian cocked an eyebrow. He would wager she did so more often than was respectable. Nonetheless, she could laugh at herself. Another thing to like about her in addition to her straightforwardness.

“Think nothing of it.” He flicked a speck of lint off his cuff. “I was glad to be of help.”

A fine line drawing her brows together, Miss Brockman swept her light blue glance around those standing nearest to them. Several people averted their gazes or turned away. Others boldly stared, disapproval stamped upon their judgmental features.

Defiance flashed in her eyes, and she stepped forward, murmuring, “Aren’t you going to ask me to dance, my lord?”

Her boldness conquered his vacillation.

Yes. Yes, Caspian was. And gladly, too.

He swept his lips into what he hoped was a charming smile.

“Miss Brockman? Would you care to dance?”

Caspian extended his hand, still half-expecting her to turn in a whirl of blue and ivory and dash away, leaving him standing there like the leper most of Society regarded him as.

“I would be utterly delighted.” She produced a smile so radiant that he blinked rather stupidly at the brilliance.

She openly cocked a snook at the busybodies looking down their haughty noses at him.

What an intriguing spitfire.

Something more than gratitude flickered near his cold heart.

“My brother has spoken so *highly* of you, Lord Strathmore.” Miss Brockman raised her voice just enough to carry several feet away but still remain modulated. “I am acquainted with so *few* gentlemen of such noble character, integrity, and moral scruples.”

Her declaration was met with more than one irritated harrumph and offended scowl.

The minx was truly doing it up brown.

What an unexpected delight.

Caspian firmed his lips against the grin tugging at the corners.

Her brother was right. Corinna Brockman was a unique young woman. A woman Caspian would very much like to further his acquaintance with.

As he led her onto the dance floor, he whispered close to her ear, "Thank you."

She turned her rounded eyes up to his, her innocent blue irises ringed with a dark gray-indigo searching his face. Rather than pretend she didn't know what he referred to, she said, "I despise bullies and hypocrites. Gossips too. The *ton* is overrun with those types of vermin."

A chuckle throttled its way up his throat.

By thunder, she was refreshing.

Le beau monde would not appreciate her unsavory comparison.

They took their places across from each other as the musicians played the first few chords of the waltz. Caspian bowed, and Miss Brockman curtsied.

They didn't speak the first several stanzas. It had been a long while since Caspian had danced and even longer since he'd held a beautiful woman in his arms.

Corinna's perfume, that tantalizing mixture of honeysuckle and almond, teased his nostrils as her silky hair brushed his chin every now and again. She wasn't a particularly graceful dancer, and she missed a step more than once. Several times in fact. Nonetheless, her exuberance and sheer joy in dancing more than compensated for her lack of finesse.

The tempting bundle in his embrace felt so right, so perfect. As if her supple curves had been made to fit with his masculine contours. It almost made him want...

Never mind.

Traipsing down bumpy paths of what-ifs and mayhaps wasn't productive or helpful.

Would Corinna share the supper dance with him?

Should Caspian ask her to reserve it for him now?

No. That might give her the impression that he held more than a passing interest in her.

He did, devil take it.

But not enough to pursue or court her.

He was a confirmed bachelor, and he wouldn't have it any other way. Besides, no woman was eager to join with a man rumored to have killed his entire family—even if there wasn't a grain of truth in the tattle.

“What happened to your face?”



The question was so unexpected, Caspian missed a step but quickly recovered.

Glancing down, he met Corinna's candid gaze. Peering into her clear blue eyes was like slipping into a warm lake and floating there. Peaceful and calm as the gentle, soothing water lapped over his skin.

This woman could make him want things he'd long ago decided he didn't want—would never have.

Marriage. Children. Peace and contentment.

“What?”

What had she asked him?

“Your face?” Her focus shifted to the scar. “What happened?”

Most women averted their gazes, yet this precocious vixen brazenly asked him about his scar. He appreciated her candor.

Caspian looked past the halo of moonlit curls atop her head. He flexed his jaw, the anger, terror, and grief still capable of clawing at his mind...his soul.

“There was a fire six years ago. I only escaped by jumping through an upper-story window. The rest of my family wasn't as fortunate. I also have scars on my arm and shoulder.”

“Oh,” Corinna breathed softly. “How awful. I'm truly sorry.”

Caspian warred with the desire to glance downward again. He couldn't bear to see her splendid eyes filled with pity.

He lost the short battle.

What was it about this woman that beckoned to him?

“I'd like to hear the tale if you'd like to share it.” She peeked up, only compassion warming her gaze. “I'd vow you

haven't spoken of it, have you?"

"Not much."

"It might help you heal."

Just like that.

No beating around the bush. No less than subtle hints or probing explorations.

How could she know he hadn't healed?

Oh, his body had mended, but his soul remained tormented. Guilt was an insidious thing. He could neither have prevented the blaze nor rescued anyone. Yet the fact that he'd survived, and his family had not, scraped his conscience raw.

The ugly accusations and vile allegations that he'd set the fire had heaped salt into his already oozing wounds.

Caspian permitted a cockeyed smile, for once, unconcerned about the ghoulish effect the motion would cause. Few people were interested in the unembellished truth.

"It's not romantic or adventurous. A tragedy in all aspects."

Corinna didn't seem to mind the way his scar pulled his mouth upward.

Glancing around, the arch of her winged brows pulled together, she gave a little nod. "The library."

The library? What?

"What?" He sounded like an empty-headed beef wit.

"We can talk privately in the library. That's the room I ran out of," Corinna offered by way of an explanation.

The music slowed, and they came to a stop.

"I'll meet you in five minutes." She curtsied, a rushed and wobbly dip that would never pass muster at Almacks but was endearingly Corinna.

Did she adhere to *any* strictures with propriety?

Caspian rather hoped not.

"I just have to contrive a viable excuse for my brother and sister-in-law." She grinned, revealing a row of small white teeth. "I believe I shall be overcome by the unfortunate incident earlier and need a lie-down to recover."

The incorrigible minx.

“Corinna...”

Blister and blast.

A swift glance around revealed no one had heard Caspian’s slip of the tongue.

“Miss Brockman, don’t do anything rash or reckless,” he said in a fierce undertone as Brockman approached, no doubt to collect his sister lest the rumormongers start flapping their forked tongues and tails. “Think of your reputation.”

Even friendship had limits. Brockman would not forgive him if Corinna’s reputation was comprised by a blackguard such as Caspian.

All he needed was another scandal.

“I’m rarely impulsive, my lord.”

The impish glint in those remarkable blue eyes and tipping the pink petals of her full mouth upward shouted otherwise.

“Why do I find that difficult to believe?” he asked dryly.

Corinna slanted her head. “You shouldn’t believe what you hear, my lord. Far wiser, I think, to form one’s own opinions.”

“Touché.”

Caspian couldn’t fault her wisdom. Nevertheless, he wouldn’t meet with her.

To do so would be the epitome of impetuosity.

Insane. Foolhardy. Heedless.

Caspian was none of those.

Corinna’s madcap scheme was certain to end in disaster, no matter how tempted he was to spend time alone with the fascinating minx. Because the truth was, he could offer her nothing more than friendship, and every primal instinct in him shouted friendship with her would never be enough.

He wasn’t interested in marriage. Should he and Corinna be found unchaperoned, Brockman, his fusty-to-his-starched-neckcloth brother, the Earl of Renshaw, and their father, the Marquess of Trentholm, would have Caspian bound, gagged, and standing before a cleric before the sun set on another day.

Likely with a gun, or three, pointed at his person.

Intent on finding that bottle of scotch and putting the enchanting not-for-him Miss Corinna Brockman from his mind, Caspian strode across the floor.

“Strathmore?” Voice just short of a screech, Lady Sewell scooted into his path, forcing him to halt lest he trample her. Disapproval pinched her face so tightly that it rivaled a goose’s hind end.

“What are your intentions toward Miss Brockman?” she demanded.

What in the blazes?

One dance did not warrant such intrusiveness.

Caspian gave her a frigid stare. “How, pray tell, is that any of your concern?”

In his eight and twenty years, he’d never met a more invasive tabby.

Giving a disdainful sniff, Lady Sewell jutted her long, imperious nose upward. In a tone dripping with condescension and censure she declared, “I cannot begin to imagine why my cousin invited *you*.”

“Probably the same benevolent reason she invited you.” Leaning down, he winked. “Obligation...or pity.”



Nottinghamshire Court Dining Room

The next morning

Despite forbidding her wayward attention to drift to the dining room's entrance, Corinna darted an inconspicuous glance to the double doors. At least five and twenty other guests had risen early and enjoyed the succulent spread Lady Osborne had provided.

However, Lord Strathmore was not among them.

Corinna owed him an apology.

She'd not been able to finagle a way to meet him in the library. After her waltz with the baron, Lady Sewell had descended upon Corinna like winter fog on the Thames. The woman simply refused to go away. What was more, she didn't have a single complimentary thing to say about his lordship.

When Corinna said his scar was rather dashing, her ladyship had gaped at her agog as if Corinna had served her toads or dung beetles for tea.

From the straight blade of his nose, full, well-formed lips, and the regal contours and planes of his face, Caspian, Baron Strathmore was an attractive man—despite the scar marring his left cheek. His amber-brown eyes held intellect, humor, and kindness, and his wavy sable hair fell over his forehead in a charmingly boyish manner.

He affected her like no man ever had before.

It disconcerted and fascinated.

Part of Corinna wanted to explore these novel feelings, and another part of her warned her to stay as far away from Caspian, Baron Strathmore, as was feasible for the rest of the house party.

Not one to forgo a challenge, she knew what course she'd take without a great deal of introspection.

Corinna didn't know Lady Sewell well, and after their encounter, she had no desire to further their acquaintance. Due to the woman's barnacle-like attentiveness and incessant banal diatribe, Corinna hadn't enjoyed another dance before supper, let alone been able to keep her assignation with Lord Strathmore.

By that time, she'd no choice but to concede defeat and go into supper with Mercy and Ronan. Strathmore wouldn't have waited an hour and a half—if he'd shown up. Corinna hadn't seen him for the remainder of the evening.

She didn't let herself question why that mattered so much. Confound Lady Sewell.

Who gave a rat's rump whether cerulean or saffron would be fashionable next season or if silk flowers were all the rage for adorning gowns? And who, by all that was holy, considered the symptoms of la grippe or bunions—*bunions!*—a pleasant topic of conversation?

Assuredly not Corinna.

Worse yet, Lady Sewell's pointed and indiscreet questions regarding Corinna's marriage prospects bordered on an inquisition. By the time her ladyship finally departed, Corinna had begun to consider a faux fainting spell. And in twenty plus years, she'd not once succumbed to the vapors.

Having filled her plate at the sideboard, Corinna searched for a vacant chair at one of the many round tables seating eight or ten arranged throughout the room. Preferably one at a table with a familiar face.

Mercy and Ronan hadn't come below yet.

Mama and Papa weren't coming, and her dear friend Cathryn Knighton had chosen to spend the winter with her brother, Henry, Earl of Towler, rather than attend the frenzy of winter house parties.

Corinna returned Garland Claiborne's exuberant wave to join her from a table near the mullioned windows. Only Garland and her plump twin sisters, Edmonia and Joanna, occupied the table. Their other sister, Louise, and their parents

must not have come down yet. Or perhaps they'd chosen to break their fasts in their chambers.

Cheerful, unpretentious, and with a propensity to rotundness, the Claibornes' wealth had been attained via commerce and therefore *smelled of the shop*. A transgression that made them practically immoral amongst the self-important upper ten thousand.

Ridiculous and reprehensible.

The eldest of four daughters, Garland was quite firmly on the shelf at one and thirty, but she didn't seem to mind spinsterhood. Many of the usual *tonnish* families with eligible sons and daughters were present, but Corinna couldn't help but notice the majority of the younger, married couples were not.

Most peculiar, that.

An appalling and oh-so unwelcome thought nearly made Corinna stumble, putting a strawberry tottering on her plate in danger of plummeting onto the floor.

Was Lady Osborne up to her infamous matchmaking machinations again?

Was this...?

Corinna made a surreptitious sweep of the room.

Surely, Lady Osborne hadn't included Corinna because she hoped to arrange a match for *her*? The thought very nearly stole her appetite. Except strawberry crepes were a rare treat indeed, and it would take considerably more than a dreadful matrimonial-related thought to put her off her breakfast entirely.

The rain-lashed glass revealed cranky January weather—there'd be no outdoor activities today. Sulky gunmetal-gray skies portended a wet day. Which meant endless rounds of cards, charades, parlor games, pianoforte performances, and God save her, solos from some of the tone-deaf wretches in this very room. Likely put up to the humiliating task by mamas who refused to acknowledge their darlings' lack of talent.

Settling onto the chair, her back to the door, Corinna tamped down her disappointment.

Perhaps she might scuttle off to Lady Osborne's library and browse the shelves for books on architecture or one of her other favorite topics.

Garland speared a piece of sausage and, wagging her thick eyebrows, popped the bite into her mouth. "Mmm. Delicious."

"Good morning, Garland." Snapping her serviette open, Corinna smiled at the twins. "Edmonia. Joanna."

"Morning, Corinna," Edmonia said before taking a drink of hot chocolate.

Mouth full, Joanna lifted her fork in greeting.

A moment later, Garland's heavy eyebrows crashed together, creating a single fuzzy, writhing caterpillar above her prominent nose when she glanced beyond Corinna. "Lord, spare us."

An expletive or a prayer?

Edmonia and Joanna swung their attention toward where their sister stared. At once disquiet clouded their bright eyes, and they exchanged troubled glances.

It was all Corinna could do not to turn around and see what had disgruntled the Claibornes so.

"How one can have such a... *beefy* appetite so early in the morning is beyond my comprehension." Adelpia Haywood's snide insinuation struck home.

Edmonia winced and sent a frantic glance around as if searching for a savior.

Blinking rapidly, Joanna put her fork down and dropped her focus to her half-full plate but not before Corinna saw the moisture pooling in her pretty brown eyes.

Angry red blotches covered Garland's cheeks, and she adjusted her grip on her knife and fork as if preparing to go into battle.

Adelpia and her evil cohort minced to stand behind two of the vacant chairs.

"Indeed," Doretta chimed in with a falsely innocent upward bend of her rouged mouth. She ran her palms over her straight-as-a-mop-handle hips. "It would take me a week to consume *that* much food."

One more word, and Corinna would kick decorum across the dining room and jab the spiteful wench with her fork.

“Ah, that explains why you have the figure of a malnourished street lad.”

Caspian.

Six pairs of feminine eyes veered to the new arrival, and Corinna grinned unabashedly.

“I’d say you both also have the ragged manner of street urchins, but that would insult the ragamuffins who don’t *know* better.” An I-dare-you-to-say-another-word grin affixed to his face, Strathmore set his generously full plate upon the table.

Well done, you.

No humor lit his brandy-colored eyes as he scraped his censorious attention over the troublemakers before drawing the chair out beside Corinna.

Adelphia’s mouth sagged to her flat chest.

Doretta opened her mouth twice, but no sound came forth.

They rather resembled banked trout, mouths gaping. Or pelicans. Angry and humiliated fish *or* fowl, and their fuming glares promised retribution.

The Claiborne sisters’ brown-eyed gazes veered between Caspian and the meddlesome pair.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

Corinna had difficulty dragging her focus from the striking planes and angles of Caspian’s face. A lock of sable hair had fallen onto his brow in an endearing fashion.

Spearing him with a burn-in-Hades glare meant to incinerate him to ashes, Doretta snatched Adelphia’s hand, and the pair stomped off.

Edmonia giggled, and Joanna joined her.

“Thank you, sir,” Garland said, smearing marmalade on a triangle of toast.

“My pleasure.” He gave Corinna a side-eyed glance. “I detest bullies and hypocrites.”

Something unfurled in her chest, and she smiled up at him.

“Hear, hear,” Joanna said.

“There you are. Just the two I was looking for.”

Lady Osborne cruised forth, a regal schooner in full sail and, as typical, attired in black. Aware of her power and position, the peeress used both to her advantage with considerable skill. “I require assistance with planning parlor games in my salon at exactly half of ten.”

In the characteristic fashion of aristocrats, she didn’t ask but directed.

If Lady Osborne required assistance with a single detail of the house party, Corinna would apologize to Adelpia and Doretta. *That*, most assuredly, wasn’t happening.

Her ladyship recognized Corinna’s skepticism. Giving a little huff, she leveled Corinna and Caspian a do-not-argue commanding look.

Corinna scrambled for an excuse, but not a single believable tarradiddle sprang to mind.

A piece of toast in his hand, Caspian angled his head. “I am happy to assist you as long as Miss Brockman and these lovely ladies are also available.”

He swept his gaze over the beaming Claiborne sisters.

Three heads bobbed in such eager unison, they might’ve practiced for weeks to accomplish such synchronization.

“Hmph.” Lady Osborne barely paused. “Very well. Do not be late.”

She drifted away to greet her other guests, and Corinna gave Caspian a skeptical look.

“If she needs assistance with parlor games, I’m a penguin.”

He angled close. “I’ll bet my boots that Lady Osborne is up to no good.”

Garland leaned forward and said under her breath, “Do you think she’s playing matchmaker with you two?”

Corinna darted Caspian a flabbergasted glance, and they both burst into laughter.

“No,” he choked out, having just swallowed his bite of toast. He gulped down a mouthful of tea, looking for all the world as if he’d been asked to wed Methuselah.

Corinna wasn't sure whether to be relieved or affronted.

"No." Corinna shook her head so hard a curl sprang free of the neat knot Betsy had arranged. "Indeed not," she said again for emphasis. "Please, I beg you, do not start that rumor."

"Of course not," Garland agreed, and her sisters nodded their affirmation. "Forgive me for suggesting it."

She appeared so contrite, Corinna felt sorry for her.

"It's of no consequence," she assured Garland.

"None," Caspian managed through his coughing fit.

Why, then, did something near disappointment root around Corinna's middle at his vehement protest?



Three hours later

From beneath half-closed eyes, Caspian eyed the sun streaming through the windows. The rainstorm had passed through, leaving the ground damp and the intrepid sun shining through the remaining clouds. A rainbow shone in the distance, the ends of the colorful arc disappearing into the treetops.

Under Lady Osborne's supervision, the commandeered guests had discussed and planned parlor games for well over an hour. Corinna sat to his left, and the trio of Claiborne sisters had been assigned to a table situated near a window.

Wearing pained expressions, Andrew Darby and Hetty Charleston occupied one of the other matching plum and gold settees while Lord Oswald Overton and Nora Talcott perched awkwardly on the third. All appeared like trapped animals, poised to flee given the first opportunity.

Any doubt that Caspian entertained that Lady Osborne was up to her matchmaking meddling had dissipated the moment the dame had ordered everyone to their respective seats. Of the three pairs, only he and Corinna had carried on a conversation and even chuckled together.

The stilted interactions of the other couples singled out for her ladyship's romantic interference suggested Lady Osborne had missed her mark. Their frequent desperate glances toward the closed doors proclaimed no wedding bells would soon toll on their behalf.

"Are we agreed then?" Corinna glanced up from the foolscap she'd been writing upon. "Kiss Your Shadow, Blind Man's Bluff, Charades, Postman's Knock, The Toilette, and The Aviary?"

Caspian's personal favorite.

Her forehead creasing in the adorable manner it did when she concentrated, Corinna glanced downward. "Did I miss any?"

The Claiborne sisters had suggested several other kissing games, including Kiss the Candlestick, Kiss the Nun, and Kiss the Monkey. Caspian suspected it wasn't as much because they wanted to be kissed but because they enjoyed seeing others in a bit of a pickle.

"No. I believe that is all we agreed upon." Lady Osborne gave a satisfied nod.

"What about the forfeits?" Garland Claiborne asked.

Caspian could well guess which forfeit she'd suggest: kissing.

"I shall decide the forfeits for each game," Lady Osborne announced as she rose from her armchair where she'd overseen the proceedings as regally as a queen upon her throne holding court.

On the pretense of straightening the writing implements, Caspian bent his neck and whispered to Corinna. "The weather's cleared. Would you like to stretch your legs before luncheon?"

In the process of sprinkling sand upon the ink, Corinna turned her head toward the window then met his eyes. Nothing artificial or scheming gleamed in her gaze. Just the clear-eyed, innocent contemplation he'd come to recognize as uniquely hers.

"Yes. I just need to let Ronan know." She wrinkled her nose. "Mama made me promise I would keep him and Mercy abreast of my activities. You'd think I was twelve and not a grown woman."

"Why aren't your parents here, Corinna?" Caspian asked as he capped the inkwell. From Ronan's accounts, the Marquess and Marchioness of Trentholm were loving parents and their family was close-knit.

Caspian's family had lived beneath the same roof and got on reasonably well. That is when Florinda wasn't in one of her

moods which tumbled the house chimney-over-foundation for days—occasionally weeks—at a time.

“Marissa tripped on the stairs and broke her wrist two days before we were to leave.” She swept a sprinkling of sand off the table with the palm of her hand. “Our parents didn’t want to leave her, and since Mercy and Ronan were attending the house party, they have the privilege of chaperoning me.”

She gave an impish grin, and Caspian couldn’t help but tip his mouth upward in response.

“I’m not certain they consider it a privilege,” she quipped. “More of a familial obligation.”

Except for the Claiborne sisters, who had stopped to admire a collection of snuff boxes in a curio cabinet, the others recruited to plan the parlor games had beelined to the exit and departed with the alacrity of someone chased by Hades’ own hounds.

Lady Osborne approached, a speculative glint in her eye. “I shall take the list, Miss Brockman. Thank you for indulging an old woman. I have no idea what young people enjoy these days.”

That was as big a tarradiddle as Caspian had ever heard. Lady Osborne was fully aware of current trends and last year’s fashions, which she wouldn’t be caught dead wearing.

Corinna passed Lady Osborne the paper. “I was happy to help.”

Her ladyship leveled a droll glance on the whispering trio gawping over the snuff boxes. “Thank you, Misses Claiborne, for your time and assistance.”

A clear dismissal by her ladyship if Caspian had ever heard one. The three mumbled their replies and filed from the room.

Caspian hadn’t a doubt the dame had manipulated the situation so that he and Corinna were the last ones remaining.

He exchanged a wry glance with Corinna.

From the jollity dancing in her eyes, she knew exactly what the crafty old bird was up to as well.

“Might I suggest a stroll through the gardens?” Lady Osborne gave a pointed glance to the French windows on the

opposite wall. Sunlight filtered through the panes, casting miniature rainbows on the floor.

“After a rain, it’s quite lovely, and the flagstone footpath will ensure your footwear isn’t muddied. Most of the pathways are visible from the house, so no one dare suggest anything untoward.”

Caspian recognized balderdash when he heard it and was confident Corinna did too.

“We were just discussing how pleasant it would be to stretch our limbs.” Caspian met her ladyship’s gaze directly. “Brockman should be informed. I don’t wish to overstep.”

“I’ll need to fetch my bonnet and wrap. I can tell my brother and Mercy.” Corinna gave him a grateful look. “They may wish to join us.”

“An excellent notion.” One hand on the latch, Lady Osborne bestowed an approving smile. “Do be sure to throw a coin into the fountain and make a wish. You never know. It might come true.”

And unicorns and fairies visit the fountain during full moons.

She departed, leaving the door wide open behind her as was proper.

“Could she be any more obvious?” Caspian clasped his nape, unexpected and foreign abashment sluicing through him. He’d become accustomed to being a pariah, and to have a powerful peeress actively attempting to herd him to the altar disquieted him no small amount.

Corinna gave an unladylike snort. “Lady Osborne’s not even trying to be subtle. It’s rather disconcerting.”

The merest frown puzzled Corinna’s forehead. She swept a hand over her cheek, perhaps brushing a grain of sand away.

“She’s practically throwing us together. On the other hand, Lady Sewell warned me to give you a wide berth, my lord. She’s why I couldn’t meet you in the library last night.”

Caspian wanted to ask Corinna to address him by his given name, but it wasn’t done. And it would suggest a relationship that not only didn’t exist but never could.

Lifting his head, he swept his gaze over her delicate features. With the sunlight haloing her from behind, the sun glinting off her ashen hair, she appeared angelic. Innocent. Incapable of deceit or treachery.

The exact opposite of what people thought of him.

“I didn’t go to the library last night, Corinna.”

He permitted himself the luxury of saying her name—Lord curse him for a selfish rotter.

The dark study had sufficed for nursing the three fingers’ worth of scotch he’d allowed himself.

“Oh.” For a second, bafflement colored her gaze before her typical resilience bubbled forth. “Well then, you can tell me about the fire during our walk if you wish.”

One hand on his hip, he stared at the door Lady Osborne had disappeared through. “Lady Sewell asked me, bold as brass, what my intentions were toward you.”

He faced Corinna, hoping his expression didn’t reveal his conflicting emotions.

“She did not!” A shade of becoming pink tinged Corinna’s sloping cheekbones, and she firmed her mouth into two thin ribbons. “Those two women are behaving most peculiarly.” She speared a puzzled glance toward the empty doorway. “If I didn’t know better, I’d suspect something more was afoot.”

Something was.

Who knew what Lady Osborne’s motivation was, but for whatever implausible reason, her ladyship had put her mind to making a match between him and Corinna. An effort that was doomed to failure.

It was best Caspian dispelled groundless hopes or girlish expectations Corinna might harbor.

He took her hand and ran his thumb over the back of it.

“I think you should know that though I am a baron and expected to marry and produce an heir, I have no plans to do either. Marriage is not on my horizon nor a part of my destiny. Not now and not in the future.”

The color leached from Corinna’s face. Ire flashed in those remarkable eyes as she withdrew her hand. She fashioned a

smile so frosty, a shiver skittered up his spine.

“What extraordinary arrogance, my lord. You’ve mistaken my compassion and politesse for...” She gave a harsh laugh and waved her hands back and forth. “Well, I don’t know what for, exactly. Certainly not girlish infatuation. Regardless, suffice it to say *you* are mistaken. I do not now, nor have I since we met, entertained a single romantic notion regarding *you*.”

Disdain rendered each word an icy crack of pent-up fury.

She spun on her heel and marched toward the exit muttering beneath her breath.

Of all the...

Conceited bufflehead.

Unbelievable gall.

Mulish tosspot.

“Corinna...”

Bugger it.

Caspian strode after her and managed to catch her upper arm just before she reached the doorway. He spun her toward him.

Her mouth parted in astonishment. “What...?”

Giving in to the urge that had harangued Caspian since he’d first set eyes on the termagant and casting all common sense and caution to the wind, he lowered his lips to hers.

Corinna remained rigid for a half dozen heartbeats then sagged into him, her mouth softening beneath his. Several blissful moments passed as Caspian tasted heaven, while his mind kept repeating,

Why not marry her? Why not?



Floating on a heady cloud of feathers and sparkles, and mayhap even a rainbow, Corinna dragged her mouth away from Caspian's. She never wanted their kiss to end, but someone might come upon them. Kissing in full view of the corridor was asking for a scandal, and the consequences could be disastrous for two people not the least interested in marrying each other despite that marvelous kiss.

“We must stop, Caspian.”

Was that breathy voice hers?

All manner of winged insects fluttered madly around Corinna's middle while her uncooperative knees had become the consistency of pudding and seemed incapable of holding her up.

Lord above, she must gather her scattered wits and pull herself together.

No more equilibrium-shattering kisses.

Besides, she was livid with the pompous boulder whose iron-like arms held her upright as she pressed her cheek into the impossibly hard wall of his chest. After all, he'd just told her that she wasn't a marital prospect.

No, that wasn't fair. Caspian had said that *marriage* wasn't in his future—not that marriage *to her* wasn't.

That knowledge didn't console as much as it ought to have done. Instead, it left her dejected and flummoxed.

What had happened to so put him off the prospect of nuptials?

Corinna felt certain it had something to do with the fire.

“You must let me go,” Corinna whispered urgently, even though her limbs refused to budge, and his embrace was quite

the most splendid thing. A warm, spicy, musky aroma clung to him. It proved an intoxicating aphrodisiac.

“Caspian.” She pushed ineffectually at his arms. “Someone might see us.”

Would see them, in a house bursting with guests and servants.

“Would that be so awful?” Caspian murmured into her temple.

Was he serious?

Didn’t he realize what that would mean?

A forced marriage. Not that Corinna would agree to such an awful arrangement. She would not.

He’d just said he had no plans to marry. Unless Caspian was impossibly daft—which he assuredly was not—he knew their embrace rendered her all but compromised.

Stupid that.

That a man and a woman couldn’t enjoy a kiss without Society reading the marriage banns was the epitome of hypocrisy.

Would that be so awful?

No, it mightn’t be at all.

But why would Caspian ask such a thing after soundly telling her he wasn’t marriage material?

Unless he was as conflicted as she. As befuddled and double-minded at these foreign emotions toppling all of her ramparts and battlements and making her question her long-held beliefs regarding marriage.

Nay, not marriage. Arranged marriages. Marriages of convenience. Forced marriages and affectionless Society matches based on station, power, breeding, and the size of the bride’s dowry.

“Need I remind you, Caspian, that *you* are the one who just told me you have no intention of marrying?” No malice threaded Corinna’s soft reprimand.

His expression grew guarded, but she forged onward.

Angling her chin upward in the manner Mama called headstrong, Corinna leveled him a starchy stare. At least she *hoped* it was starchy. She rather suspected she appeared more doe-eyed and mesmerized than censorial.

“I doubt our kiss changed your mind regarding the institution in the past few minutes.” She fingered his jacket’s lapel, trying but failing not to notice the sinewy breadth of his shoulders.

As he had last night, he wore all black.

Was that a reflection of the unkind moniker Society had given him? The Blackhearted Baron.

Lady Sewell had imparted that particular tidbit with a great deal of relish, truth be told.

Caspian touched his forehead to hers in a gesture so unpredictably tender, so unexpectedly sweet, a lump formed in her throat.

Corinna swallowed hard. Then swallowed again.

Blast and dash.

Why did he affect her this way?

She was not a watering pot nor a woman given to vacillating emotions. Corinna was a woman of strong opinions, firm values, and even more stalwart expectations for her future.

“If ever a woman could make me change my mind, it would be you, Corinna, my sweet.”

My sweet?

A groan of despair, or perchance delight, wedged itself low in Corinna’s chest, where she refused to let it manifest. *If* she were the sort of nincompoop to fall in love with the alacrity of an Ascot racehorse, a part of her heart might’ve tumbled onto his polished shoes at that moment.

Quite naturally, she was not.

Sighing, Caspian drew away and put her at arms’ length. “Regardless, I have not had second thoughts. I shall not marry. There is much about me you do not know. I would never subject my wife to the cruel shunning, cold-hearted and

calculated snubbing, and even more vicious unfounded gossip I have endured these past six years.”

Corinna bit her lower lip.

He had suffered. A lot and alone.

Her heart ached for him.

She'd have to be queer in the attic to consider the possibility she might have feelings for a man she'd known for less than four and twenty hours, but her heartstrings tugged nonetheless.

“I am still willing to hear that tale, Caspian. You'll find I'm a rather good listener and I never share confidences.” Never one to harbor a grudge, she gave him an impish grin. “I propose we pretend the kiss didn't happen.”

He quirked a dark eyebrow with practiced pessimism.

Had he always been so cynical, or had he erected bastions and battlements to protect himself from further pain and wounding?

“Call the kiss a moment of insanity,” she said.

Thoroughly enjoyable insanity.

She fluttered her hands around.

“For what it is worth, I'm not husband-hunting. I fully expect to end up on the shelf because nuptials hold little enticement for me. I'm not biddable and submissive and have no interest in becoming so.”

“*Nooo?*” He pitched his voice higher and dragged the word out into multiple syllables. “I would *never* have guessed.”

His theatrical sarcasm brought a grin to his lean face and dispelled the earlier tension.

“Lady Osborne says you're a ‘hellion and spitfire wrapped into one unpredictable, incorrigible, unladylike, wholly unsuitable bundle.’”

He gave her a devilish wink.

“She's not entirely wrong.” Corinna rolled a shoulder. “I cannot bring myself to care overly much.”

Caspian chuckled. “Nor I.”

If she were honest, and she always strived to be so, that scrumptious kiss—her first kiss—*had* knocked her world off its axis. She suspected her life would never be the same. Nevertheless, she yearned to get to know Caspian better, which would only happen if he believed she wasn't interested in marriage.

Which she wasn't—*was she?*

“We can still be friends, Caspian.”

She searched his amber eyes, unable to discern anything from the carefully banal stare he regarded her with.

“Friends?” He laughed and shook his head. “Has anyone ever told you how tenacious you are, Corinna Brockman?”

At least he hadn't said friendship was impossible between a man and a woman, as Sanford staunchly maintained.

Corinna pulled a wry face.

“Many times, I confess. It's not a trait the *ton* admires. Neither is frank speech nor a penchant to disregard tongue wagging and ridiculous, outdated etiquette protocols. I also enjoy studying architecture, ancient writing, *and* herbal remedies. Hardly drawing room conversation topics.”

An expression of mock horror etched Caspian's face. “Never say so.”

Grinning, she lifted a shoulder. “In short, I'm hopelessly unsuitable for matrimony.”

“As am I.” He skewed his mouth into a cocky, boyish grin. “Let's have our walk and agree the subject of marriage is one neither of us wishes to discuss.”

“Agreed.” Nodding, she stepped through the doorway and gave a furtive glance up and down the corridor. Odd that not a single person had come along.

Not so very odd if Lady Osborne had arranged the suspiciously empty passageway.

That woman.

She must cease her matrimonial meddling and manipulating.

“I'll meet you on the terrace in ten minutes.” Corinna gave Caspian a playful, arch glance. “Unless you don't plan on

showing up again.”

Chuckling, the mellow timbre resonating in his broad chest, he ran a long, calloused finger over his scar.

Did it still pain him?

A queer ache pinched behind her breastbone to think of him in pain—suffering.

“I’ll be there. I see no harm in taking a turn about the gardens.” Caspian veered his gaze toward the long windows and jerked his chin. “Others have had the same idea.”

Corinna observed a few intrepid souls milling about the damp pavers. “Perfect. There can be no question of propriety then.”

She took her leave before her tongue betrayed her.

If ever a woman could make me change my mind, it would be you.

If ever a man could change *her* mind, it was Caspian, Baron Strathmore.



Three Days Later—Early Afternoon

The next three days passed in a blur of house party activities—some almost enjoyable but most tedious in their ridiculousness and predictability. The single day of pleasant weather Caspian had enjoyed in the gardens with Corinna had ceded to non-stop, pouring rain. Not unexpected in January in England but rather inconvenient for strolls, carriage outings, or riding.

The guests, including him, had become restless, bored, and on occasion, short-tempered. Tonight's entertainment was to include performances by anyone who claimed a musical talent—and, God save him—many who couldn't carry a tune in a teacup. Past experience had taught Caspian to expect an excruciating two or three hours with a few tolerable interludes interspersed.

He wouldn't be surprised if many house guests didn't arrive slightly tipsy in order to bear the auditory onslaught. Because he limited his consumption of alcohol, he wouldn't have that luxury.

Why Lady Osborne had thought it a splendid idea to host a two-week-long house party in January was anyone's guess. That *he'd* agreed to attend suggested he was either dicked in the knob or lonelier than he'd ever admit.

Normally, such pastimes were conducted in the summer months when outdoor activities provided numerous amusements or during Christmastide when the holiday added a degree of excitement.

Despite ordering himself not to, he again searched the various rooms for Corinna. They'd had no more private interludes, and he had yet to tell her about the fire that had forever altered his life.

Caspian couldn't explain why, and neither did he examine the complex and irrational reasons behind the desire, but he wanted to tell Corinna that night. Wanted her to know before a self-appointed pillar of society decided to impart their biased wisdom—all on the pretext of preventing Corinna from making a colossal mistake, of course.

The presence of her brother and sister-in-law in the gardens the other day had made sharing the tale impossible. Besides, Brockman already knew most of the disagreeable details, and his bride didn't need to hear the rest of the unpleasant story.

In a few short days, Corinna Brockman had wiggled her way into Caspian's thoughts and even into his dreams. Mayhap into his heart, though that notion terrified him more than jumping through that upper-story window to escape the raging inferno behind him.

When Caspian entered a room, the first thing he did was search for Corinna. When she wasn't present, he pondered where she was and what she was doing. She lit every room with her vivacious presence and clever wit, and something warm and perplexing welled up within him every time he saw her. Or thought of her. Which, truth be told, was far too often to dismiss as a passing fancy.

As he trod down the corridor, laughter carried from the drawing room. Manchester, Marquess of Sterling, stepped from the room and grinned in welcome.

“Strathmore.”

“Sterling.”

Brushing his hand over his jaw, Sterling cast a bemused glance over his shoulder then grimaced. “If I had to listen to another minute of intelligence-robbing drivel those young women call conversation...” He shook his head. “I'm off to the billiards room. As a brisk round of boxing or a vigorous ride is out of the question, I'll have to settle on the satisfying crack of billiard balls.”

Caspian well understood his friend's conundrum.

“Up for a game or two of billiards, Strathmore? Several of the chaps including Bixley, Hythe, and Silverton have already made their escapes.”

The invitation tempted, but Caspian hadn't seen Corinna today. She'd not come down to breakfast nor participated in the positively yawn-inspiring poetry reading mid-morning. Lord Bracegirdle's sonorous snores began ten minutes into "Lady of the Lake" by Sir Walter Scott.

How a person could sleep through what sounded like a hippopotamus eating a lion or the reverse, unless one was stone-deaf, stretched the imagination.

Caspian was positive the peculiar sounds that had come from Mrs. Pennyflower's vicinity constituted a severe digestive complaint. Too many prunes for breakfast, he'd be bound. The strained expressions on those seated in close proximity to her, and the swift appearance of fans and handkerchiefs over noses, had confirmed his suspicions.

Brilliant of Corinna to have avoided that unpleasantness.

However, when she hadn't been at luncheon, he considered approaching Mercy Brockman and inquiring about Corinna's whereabouts. But that might've—*would've*—given an impression Caspian didn't want to have to explain to Ronan.

Or to yourself.

"I might take you up on that offer, Sterling."

"Excellent." Sterling nodded as he pulled his sage-green and ivory waistcoat into place. His expression grew serious. "I'm glad you came. I've not heard a single disparaging whisper."

Caspian skewed his mouth up on one side. "Because anyone stupid enough to besmirch me within hearing distance of you would have their ears seared with a polite but blistering set down."

He knew his friend well.

"That is true." Sterling's low chuckle echoed in the corridor. "Do come 'round to the billiards room." With a casual wave, he ambled away.

Billiards always proved an amicable way to pass an hour or two when one was bored to one's eyeballs. If Caspian didn't find Corinna, he'd join his friend.

A few moments later, he entered the library and, hands on his hips, glanced around, somewhat surprised to find it empty.

In harmony with the wind and rain pounding the house, a fire crackled merrily in the hearth. Cozy and warm, yes, but not what he desired.

Disappointment assailed him.

Corinna wasn't here.

Imbecile.

He had no business seeking her company when he'd made it clear-as-crystal he had no interest in pursuing a serious relationship.

"Pssst."

Head cocked, he glanced around.

"Pssst. Up here, Caspian," she whispered, her tone brimming with urgency.

He glanced upward.

Corinna peeked between two shiny, dark wooden balusters almost directly above him. She looked like a naughty child or a pixy spying on him.

A narrow staircase in the corner of the same dark wood led to an upper level. Most of the balcony consisted of a narrow overhang, but rounded sitting areas had been constructed on either end.

"May I come up?"

Say yes.

She tilted her head, reminding him of a confused bird.

"Of course. I wouldn't have caught your attention if I didn't want you to know I was up here."

That was Corinna being Corinna.

She dashed an apprehensive glance toward the door.

"Hurry, though. Before someone else comes in. I'm not in the mood for company."

Evidently, he didn't qualify as company.

He grinned, absurdly pleased.

In short order, Caspian climbed the narrow risers, scarcely more than a ladder.

Corinna had pulled the green brocade cushions off the pair of wingback chairs, creating a cozy hideaway. She sat cross-legged upon one and patted the other. “Sit down. The chairs block us from the view below.”

An open book, spine up, lay beside her.

Examining her features, her over-bright eyes and slightly wan face, Caspian folded onto the cushion. “Are you hiding up here?”

Every instinct told him she was. Something had happened. Something that caused this brave, cock-a-snook-at-Society, spirited woman to sequester herself away from the rest of the guests.

“Not exactly.” She wrinkled her forehead and picked at the hem of her skirt. “I’ve chosen to avoid the company of certain persons.”

“Who?” He picked up her book, then crooked an eyebrow. “*The Castle of Otranto*?”

Corinna hitched a shoulder and leaned against the chair nearest her. “I found it on the chair. It’s not to my taste. Too dark and disturbing.”

“Nothing on architecture or herbal remedies?”

“There probably is.” She glanced upward at the shelves. “But I would have to search for them, and I was more intent on finding a place to disappear.”

“You didn’t answer my question.” Caspian closed the book and set it aside. “Who are you avoiding?”



Corinna sighed and pinched her pretty mouth into a moue. “Lady Sewell, if you must know. I doubt she can climb the stairs to get up here, so it’s the safest place other than my bedchamber.”

Lady Sewell?

That surprised him. He’d expected her to say the Marchette and Haywood chits.

Stretching his legs out before him and crossing his ankles, Caspian too, rested against a chair. Only a few inches separated them. He gathered her hand and laid her palm atop his. “What has she done that merits such stealth?”

Corinna cut him a side-eyed glance then focused on their hands. She made no effort to remove hers.

“My, aren’t you the curious fellow?”

“I don’t mean to pry. Nevertheless, the Corinna Brockman I have come to know doesn’t let an elderly tabby intimidate her, let alone make her cower away in a hidey-hole.” He caressed the back of her hand along the fine blue veins visible through her pale skin.

“This is hardly a hidey-hole, and I am not cowering.”

Caspian made a noise in his throat, neither confirming nor disagreeing.

Corinna closed her eyes for a moment, her lashes creating feathery arcs atop her high cheekbones.

“She upset me, and I lost my temper. I called her a meddling, mean-spirited curmudgeon and said she had nothing better to do than to attempt to make people as miserable as she was.” Her expression turned contrite, but she thrust her chin outward. “I won’t apologize to her. She was simply awful.”

“What did she say?”

Even in the shadowy alcove, her hair shone, a bright beacon of fair curls. Could that cloud of hair possibly be as soft as it looked? Caspian longed to comb his fingers through the silky curls or wrap them around his hand and wrist.

Draw her to him and kiss that sweet mouth once more.

“I’ll not speak of it.” The merest hint of color touched Corinna’s cheeks, and she averted her gaze.

“Corinna?” He tilted her chin upward with a bent forefinger. “Was it about me?”

Her eyes wide pools of misery, she nodded. “Yes. And the fire. She said you killed your family so you could inherit the barony. And that I should stay away from you to protect my reputation.”

So that falsehood continued to be bandied around.

“I told her she should be ashamed of herself for repeating such ugly gossip, and she shouldn’t judge lest she be judged by the same standard she condemns others. I might’ve also suggested she’d spend eternity in an uncomfortably hot place, and she’d do well to find a quiet place to pray and repent for *her* sins.”

Oh, Lord.

Was there ever such an extraordinary woman?

Appreciation and something much more potent unfurled behind his ribs.

Corinna had defended him.

Envisioning Lady Sewell’s reaction, he chuckled. “I’m sure your response wasn’t well received.”

Pursing her lips, she pointed her nose upward. “I didn’t wait around to see.”

“Come here, sweet.”

Caspian drew her into his arms. She settled her head against his chest as if it were the most natural thing. Brushing his fingers over her upper arm, he kissed the crown of her head.

“There was an inquest after I recovered enough from my injuries to be questioned. I was found innocent. It wasn’t hard to convince the magistrate that I hadn’t willingly thrown myself through an upper-story window. I could’ve died.

“I would’ve had I remained in my chamber another minute or two.”

Corinna made a soft, distressed sound in her throat.

“I think my stepmother set the blaze. She had frequent bouts of mania and depression. Kimball, our butler, overheard Florinda ranting earlier in the day about the Graystones burning in hell because of the restrictions imposed upon her to keep her and everyone else safe. Sylvia Stevens, Florinda’s maid and companion, had thrice before extinguished fires my stepmother set in her chamber.”

“How awful for all of you,” Corinna said, her voice slightly tremulous.

“Father refused to commit Florinda. I don’t believe even he understood the depths of her madness. The servants had been instructed to keep the flint and steel hidden, but Kimball suspected Florinda snuck embers upstairs and waited until everyone was asleep in the family wing.”

“Oh, Caspian.”

“I was the only survivor of my family. We lost three servants too.”

Corinna angled her head to meet his eyes. Tears glistened in hers, and one crystalline droplet leaked from the corner of her right eye.

“I am so sorry, Caspian. I know that isn’t nearly sufficient considering what you’ve undergone—your grief and loss, not to mention the dreadful false accusations.”

He caught the tear with a bent finger. “You believe me?”

She stiffened and put a palm between them, pushing herself several inches away from him.

At once, he felt bereft.

“Of course I believe you. I knew you were innocent *before* you shared the dreadful story.” She pressed her lips together. “Ronan wouldn’t be your friend if there were a jot of truth in it. Besides, I have a sense about people.”

“You’re far more generous and benevolent than many have been.” Corinna’s confidence in him was humbling and healing.

Caspian cupped her head and urged her to rest against him again. Her hair smelled of almonds and honeysuckle, and she fit against him as if they were two parts of the same mold.

“What sort of sense?” he asked.

She rested a forearm upon his chest and fiddled with a button on his jacket. “Mama calls it discernment. It’s just a queer, sickly feeling I get. Something inside me knows when people are not what they seem. You don’t make me feel that way.”

Caspian closed his eyes, relishing this moment. Savoring this precious, stolen time with this remarkable woman. No matter what the future brought, Corinna had left a mark on him...his heart...his spirit. She’d branded his soul.

Silence settled around them, cloaking them in a comfortable cocoon of contentment. The rhythmic *tick-tock* of the green marble and brass ormolu clock atop the fireplace mantel beat in time to his heart thudding in his chest.

For the first time since his family’s deaths, hope dared to bud. Mayhap, just mayhap, Caspian could dare to love. Dare to marry. Dare to have a future that wasn’t shrouded in loneliness and exile.

“Caspian?”

“Hmm?” he answered, too drowsy to open his eyes and reluctant to disturb the tranquility.

“Kiss me again.”

At once he was alert.

He would boot serenity to the other side of the world to taste Corinna’s lips once more.

Caspian shifted until she lay across his lap, cradled in his arms. “You are an absolute wonder, Corinna Brockman.”

Delight blossomed across her face.

He stared into her eyes, his heart simultaneously constricting and leaping at the adoration he saw there. Could she see the answering affection in his gaze?

A faint smile teased the corners of her lips, and her regard sank to his mouth.

Caspian needed no further invitation.

Capturing her mouth, he kissed her with the pent-up longing that had haunted him these past days. Poured all of his heart and soul into the melding of their mouths, expressing with his lips what he could not say with words.

Not yet, anyway. Mayhap never.

He lifted his head, taking in every inch of her face. Her parted mouth, her lips berry-red from his kisses. “Corinna?”

Her lashes fluttered open. “Yes?”

“May I court you?”

She cupped his scarred cheek with her soft palm. His scar had never repulsed her.

“I thought you were an avowed bachelor, Caspian.”

“I thought I was too. Until I met you.” He grazed his lips across hers. “I know you feel whatever this is between us too. Give us a chance over these next few days, and let’s see what happens. Please.”

A slow smile curved her mouth. “Lady Osborne will be impossibly smug.”

“Is that a yes?” Caspian pressed his lips to her cheek. Then her tulip of a chin. Then the satiny column of her alabaster throat.

She looped her arms around his neck and pulled him to her. “Only if you kiss me again.”



A Week Later—After Supper

Corinna sent a third furtive glance toward the drawing room door. The women had gone through to the drawing room nearly an hour ago, but the men appeared to be lingering over their cigars and spirits this evening.

This past week had been, in a word, splendid.

Caspian had proven himself a charming, attentive beau. They dined together at every meal, partnered each other for cards and dances, and thrice had managed to escape the ever-increasing scrutiny and share a few stolen kisses.

More than one person had hinted at a match between them, and Lady Osborne, as Corinna had predicted, looked upon her and Caspian with self-satisfied pride.

Mercy, sitting beside Corinna as they listened to Mrs. Pennyflower and Lady Sewell discuss various complaints afflicting the older women, nudged Corinna's arm.

Lady Sewell continued to be an annoying, cloying presence. Despite Corinna asking her to refrain from doing so, at every opportunity she imparted another disparaging morsel of gossip about Caspian.

"He'll be along soon enough." Mercy smiled and raised her teacup to her mouth. "Be warned, dear, your nemeses have noticed your distraction and are descending upon us even now."

Rot and bother.

For nearly a blessed week after Caspian had affronted them, Doretta and Adelpia had kept their distance. Although they never approached when he was near, for the past pair of days they had dared to venture forth with their barbed comments and bared claws.

“Garland Claiborne says we’re to play *The Aviary* tonight,” Adelpia said, sidling close to Lady Sewell. The two shared a conspiratorial glance.

What were they up to?

No good, to be certain.

“A personal favorite of mine,” Doretta said.

Garland and Hetty Charleston wandered nearer. “I’d hoped we have dancing again.”

Lady Osborne must’ve overheard because she stood, as regal and commanding as any monarch. Peering through her lorgnette, she surveyed the assembled women. “I have a surprise for you tonight.”

That brought forth a few excited giggles and curious murmurs.

“When the gentlemen arrive, I shall reveal the secret.” She beamed and gave her cousin, Lady Sewell, a pointed look.

Lady Sewell’s expression turned even sourer, as pinched as if she’d sucked a half dozen lemons. All at once.

As if on cue, male voices resounded in the corridor, and the men filed in amid chuckles.

As Corinna had since that afternoon in the library, she immediately meshed gazes with Caspian.

A possessive gleam in his eye, he bent his mouth into that rakish, disarming smile that threatened to turn her bones to custard.

Not, mind you, that she was complaining.

A few days ago, Corinna had scoffed at ever finding a love—finding a man to whom she could risk giving her heart. She’d found that rogue, although Caspian wasn’t truly a rogue.

No, he was strong and sensitive, intelligent and insightful, humorous and loyal, and remarkably forward-thinking when it came to men’s and women’s roles and expectations.

In short, he was perfect, and she’d fallen in love with him.

Hopelessly, helplessly, splendidly in love.

He and Ronan made straight for her and Mercy. Ronan lifted Mercy’s hand to kiss the back while Caspian bowed over

Corinna's. It wasn't quite *de rigueur* to kiss an unmarried woman's hand.

Lady Sewell's face crimped even tighter yet as she looked on.

Corinna presented her a blinding smile, which earned a flinty scowl.

Lady Osborne clapped her hands. "May I have your attention, please?"

Silence descended upon the room as the guests focused on her.

"I've kept tonight's activity a secret." She smiled, entirely too pleased with herself.

"I've organized a treasure hunt for you," she announced with theatrical aplomb.

Pleased titters and awed whispers buzzed throughout the room.

"For those who don't wish to participate, I've arranged for you to play cards, and afterward, we shall enjoy The Aviary. The rest of you will pair off and must find as many items on the list as possible and return within twenty minutes."

Why, she was practically asking for secret rendezvous with her madcap scheme.

"I have servants stationed to assure no one *wanders* above stairs."

Ah, so she'd considered the possibility of naughty assignations.

Her ladyship produced a short stack of papers. "Here are the clues for the items you will attempt to find."

"I'm game if you are," Ronan told Mercy.

She gave an eager nod. "Oh, yes. It sounds like great fun."

Ronan leveled Caspian a stern look. "I presume you mean to escort Corinna. I don't need to remind you to be on your most gentlemanly behavior."

His attention drifted to Corinna, and she gave him a wide-eyed innocent look. She was a horrid actress, and her brother's raised eyebrows confirmed he'd seen right through her ruse.

“Naturally,” Caspian agreed. “I would never do anything to tarnish Miss Brockman’s reputation.”

Other than kiss me senseless.

Rising, Corinna grinned. “Do you think Lady Osborne hid some of the objects around the house?” she asked as they crossed to collect their list.

“I’d wager on it,” Caspian said. He lowered his voice. “You look exceptionally lovely this evening. The sapphire blue of your gown makes your eyes even bluer.”

“Thank you, kind sir.”

Love beat a tattoo against her ribs. She hadn’t told him of her feelings. After all, he said he’d wanted to court her and see where things led.

He’d never said he’d reconsidered marriage.

Shoulder to shoulder, Caspian showed her the list of eight clues.

“Is everyone ready?” Lady Osborne asked.

Murmurs of assent echoed throughout the drawing room.

“Excellent.” She eyed the longcase clock. “Return at precisely twenty minutes of ten. If you’re late, you will be disqualified. Now off with you.”

In a flurry of laughter and swishing of skirts, the participants hurried from the drawing room. Caspian drew Corinna aside near the base of the stairs.

The other treasure seekers scattered in all directions.

Corinna scrunched her brow. “I think I know what the first item is.”

I sparkle and twinkle like a sunstruck gem on a waterfall.

“It’s a cravat pin.” She touched the emerald and gold pin in Caspian’s ascot with her fingertip. “A waterfall is a neckcloth style, is it not?”

“Clever girl, it is indeed,” Caspian said proudly. He looked around, then whispered. “But look.”

With his calloused finger, the nail clean and square upon the sheet, he pointed at the last clue.

Find this treasure and you needn't search for the others.

It's always sought but seldom found.

Priceless but costs nothing.

*It can never give or receive enough and lives long
after the recipient is no more.*

“If we solve this one, Caspian, we don't have to find any of the others?”

Corinna raised her puzzled glance to his.

“Precisely, and I know what it is.” Caspian glanced around again. “Come with me, darling.”

He grabbed her hand, and they ran to the library.

Another laughing couple exited as they entered.

“There's nothing on the list in there, old chap.” Andrew Darby said as he and Phillip Prescott scooted past in a rush.

“That's what he thinks, but I know otherwise.” Caspian closed the door then locked it. He leaned against the panel and boldly swept his gaze over her.

Tingling from head to toe, Corinna swallowed. She cocked her head.

“Caspian, shouldn't we be looking for the treasure?”

Eyes hooded, he shook his head.

“I found my treasure.” His voice grew husky with suppressed emotion.

Corinna's heart tumbled over itself then resumed an irregular cadence.

He held out his arms. “Come here.”

Without hesitation, she flew into his embrace.

“Lady Osborne is a wily old bird. I'll give her that,” he murmured into Corinna's hair.

She pressed into him, savoring the hard plane of his chest, the strength of his arms, his scent and the tender kiss he dropped upon her head.

“You said you knew what the last clue was.” She raised her head. “Are you going to tell me?”

He was being most mysterious.

“I think you already know.” Caspian placed her hand on his chest. “It’s what makes my heart quicken every time I see you, Corinna. It’s what makes me smile when you speak and keeps me awake at night thinking of you.”

“Oh.” Joy blossomed inside Corinna.

Did he mean what she thought he meant?

Could it be true?

“It’s always sought but seldom found.” He kissed her forehead.

Her blood sang with jubilation.

Yes. Yes.

She knew what it was too.

Sweet Jesus, she *knew*.

“It’s priceless but costs nothing.” He grazed her left cheek with his lips, and she stood on tiptoe to brush her mouth across the ragged scar ravaging his.

“It can never give or receive enough...” He stared into her eyes, and her soul heard his as surely as if he’d said the words aloud.

He loves me.

Caspian Graystone, Baron Strathmore loved the *hellion and spitfire wrapped into one unpredictable, incorrigible, unladylike, wholly unsuitable bundle.*

Corinna put her finger over his mouth. “And it lives long after the recipient is no more.”

She fashioned a tremulous smile and tried to focus through the tears misting her eyes. “It is love.”

“Yes, my dearest darling. The greatest treasure of all. Love.” Caspian cupped her chin.

“I love you, Corinna Brockman. I don’t know how it happened, but I am wholly, irreversibly, and ecstatically in love with you.”

“And I love you, Caspian.” She grinned. “Wholly, irreversibly, and ecstatically.”

“We have a few minutes before we have to return.” He caressed her cheek, the gleam in his eyes warming her blood.

“Then I suggest we not waste them talking.”

Corinna cupped his neck and pulled his head to hers.



Ten minutes later

*Just enough time to sample a few blissful kisses,
but not enough to cause a scandal.*

Caspian entered the drawing room with Corinna on his arm. A handful of the other guests had returned, and the few that had remained behind slid inquisitive glances in their direction.

Lady Osborne turned her hawk-like stare upon them, that ever-present lorgnette leveled their way. She wielded the accessory with the skill and the deadliness of a saber.

“Giving up so soon, Strathmore? Miss Brockman?”

“On the contrary, my lady. We have solved the last clue.”

“Ah, excellent. Excellent indeed.” She approached, her expression unreadable, but that deuced twinkle sparkled in her eyes.

Her ladyship was too pleased with herself by far. But then she had reason to be.

She could add another match to her list of triumphs.

Once Caspian asked for Corinna’s hand, that was.

Pray the Marquess of Trentholm was receptive to his suit because if he wasn’t, Caspian fully intended to elope with Corinna. Not that he’d told her as much.

“I rather doubt any of the others read through the list first and realized they didn’t have to solve all of the clues to win.” Lady Osborne gave an approving nod. “Well done, you. I knew you were sharp.”

Caspian swept the room with his gaze.

Lady Sewell’s skin had turned a peculiar shade of gray-green.

“The answer to the last clue is?” her ladyship prodded.

“Love,” Caspian and Corinna said in unison as he gazed into her shining eyes.

“Oh, my,” Mrs. Claiborne sighed from the card table she sat at.

“How romantic,” Mrs. Pennyflower said.

“And have you found love?” Lady Osborne asked with the pugnacity of dog after a bone.

Caspian raised Corinna’s hand and, despite Society’s rules, kissed her knuckles. “We have.”

“I expect a short betrothal,” Her ladyship said with puckish regard and arching an elegantly plucked eyebrow. “And an invitation to the wedding, of course.”

“What wedding?” Brockman asked as he, his wife, and several other guests arrived in a flurry.

“You’ll have to ask your sister about that, Brockman.” Lady Osborne glided to the center of the room. “Ladies and gentlemen. We have our winners. Baron Strathmore and Miss Brockman.”

Polite applause met her announcement.

“What’s this about a wedding?” Brockman asked again.

His wife appeared amused, a knowing smile bending her mouth.

“Well... umm.” Corinna looked at Caspian expectantly.

This wasn’t how he’d planned to announce his intention to marry Corinna. He’d only just confessed his love and hadn’t even proposed yet. A maelstrom of emotions sluiced through him in rapid succession: joy, anticipation, hesitation, concern, caution, all diminished by an overpowering, enthralling love.

Aware of the many pairs of eyes trained upon them—several not entirely congratulatory—he grinned down at Corinna while tucking her hand into the crook of his elbow. “I intend to ask for your sister’s hand.”

Her magnificent eyes shone with love, and Caspian silently thanked God for their destinies crossing. Sterling and Brockman, too for insisting he attend this house party.

Caspian braced himself for Brockman's disapproval or anger.

Instead, his friend slapped him on the shoulder and, grinning like an inebriated buffoon, exclaimed, "Splendid. Just splendid. I suspected the two of you would get on famously."

"Don't think to take credit for my matchmaking, Brockman." Lady Osborne turned a gimlet eye upon him before presenting her cousin with a victorious smile.

Lady Sewell's expression screwed tighter than a goose's hind end.

She was not pleased.

Too bloody bad.

"I would never presume to do any such thing, my lady." Brockman shifted his attention to his wife. "My wife might deserve part of the credit, however."

Mercy Brockman laughed.

Caspian took Corinna's elbow, meaning to find an isolated corner of the mansion. "I haven't actually proposed yet."

Something he wanted to promptly remedy.

"What are you waiting for, Strathmore?" Lady Osborne didn't bellow—heaven forbid she even raise her voice—but her words trumpeted around the drawing room nonetheless.

"Indeed," chirped Garland Claiborne. "Propose, Lord Strathmore."

"Here, here," Sterling called, jollity in his tenor and amused gaze.

Caspian would deal with his smug friend later.

Rather than become annoyed or embarrassed, Corinna beamed. Her gaze never strayed from his, despite the curious onlookers.

"Did you have something you wished to ask me, Caspian?"

Caspian cupped her hands in his and drew her nearer.

"What do you think, Corinna? Would you consider taking this gruff social outcast who never thought to find love and make a future with him?"

In typical Corinna fashion, she cupped his cheek. “If you can take this wholly unsuitable hellion as your wife.”

“I can. Indeed, I can.” Caspian kissed her fingers, his heart running over with love, happiness, and gratitude.

She loved him. *Him*, the Blackhearted Baron.

Amid calls of felicitations, laughter, and gleeful clapping, Caspian kicked decorum to next January and kissed her. Really kissed her. The only lady to ever touch his heart.

Epilogue

Three Months Later

St. George's Church

Half-past ten in the morning

Sitting in the first pew of St. George's Church, Lady Pandora Osborne gazed approvingly at the handsome couple standing before the altar. Victory was a splendid thing. Especially when that conquest was winning a wager against her smug cousin, Lady Octavia Sewell.

A cousin who hadn't been extended an invitation to the wedding.

Resplendent in a rose and ivory ensemble, the bride glowed with youthful beauty and love for her new husband. The groom, in his usual black suit but sporting a tone-on-tone rose-gold paisley waistcoat, had never appeared happier or more amiable as he gazed with undisguised adoration at his wife.

There was nothing more satisfying or rewarding than a genuine love match. Particularly for a couple the *haut ton* had deemed unworthy for some ridiculous reason or other.

Though Pansy suspected the Baron and new Baroness of Strathmore would've made a brilliant match without her *assistance*, she nevertheless regarded them with unrepressed pride and approval.

How many matches did this make now?

Mentally tallying, she tapped her gloved hand upon her thigh.

In truth, she'd lost count.

Regardless, she didn't mean to retire from matchmaking any time soon. No indeed. There were a great number of spinsters, bluestockings, wallflowers, rakehells, and

rapscallions who deserved their own happily ever afters. The more difficult and challenging the match, the more satisfaction she derived from the nuptials.

A surreptitious glance to her left brought the unsmiling face of Sanford Brockman, Earl of Renshaw and heir to the Trentholm Marquisette, into focus. Even *she* might not have the skills necessary to find that earl a bride. Although...several other wicked earls had made love matches.

Perhaps she'd consider Renshaw for a future project, but given his reputation for pomposity and haughtiness, it would be a true test of her matrimonial talents.

Hand in hand, Lord and Lady Strathmore approached. He bowed, and Corinna dipped into a curtsy before brushing her cheek against Pansy's.

"Thank you," Corinna whispered. "I know you orchestrated our meeting."

"You are most welcome, my dear." Pansy extended her hand for Strathmore's obligatory kiss. "But the truth of it is, in your case, I believe Divine Providence had a greater hand in your destiny than anything I did."

He gave Pansy a roguish wink. "When are *you* going to marry again?"

"Pshaw. Enough of your nonsense, Strathmore. Don't you have a wedding breakfast to attend?"

"Aye, and a ship to catch for an Italian honeymoon." He waggled his eyebrows.

Pansy chuckled as pink tinged Corinna's cheeks.

He really was a charming devil.

Corinna smiled up into her husband's handsome face. "It matters naught who or what gets the credit for our happiness."

"Indeed not," Strathmore agreed, wrapping his arm around her slender waist. "What matters is we shall spend the rest of our lives together, cherishing a love neither of us thought to ever be gifted."

They continued down the aisle accepting well wishes and felicitations.

As she stood, Pansy swept her astute gaze over the assembled guests.

Yes, love was a very good reason to meddle in the affairs of others.

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About the Author



USA Today Bestselling, award-winning author COLLETTE CAMERON® scribbles Scottish and Regency historicals featuring dashing rogues and scoundrels and the intrepid damsels who reform them. Blessed with an overactive and witty muse that won't stop whispering new romantic romps in her ear, she's lived in Oregon her entire life, though she dreams of living in Scotland part-time. You'll always find a dash of inspiration and a pinch of humor in her sweet-to-spicy timeless romances®.

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From the Desk of Collette Cameron

Thank you for reading A ROGUE WORTH THE RISK. I hope you've enjoyed the latest installment in THE HONORABLE ROGUES®. When I introduced Corinna in NO LADY FOR THE LORD, I knew she had to have a very special hero. Someone who'd challenge her but also allow her the freedom

she craved. That's why Caspian is so perfect for her. Shunned, misunderstood, and determined to never marry, Corinna is exactly what *he* needed.

Lady Osborne knew exactly what she was doing when she meddled in their affairs.

To ensure you don't miss any of my new releases, subscribe to [The Regency Rose](#), my newsletter (Get a free book too!). I also have a fabulous [VIP Reader Group on Facebook](#). If you're a fan of my books and historical romance, I'd love to have you join me. You'll also be the first to see new covers, read exclusive excerpts, be the first to know about contests and giveaways, help me pick titles, name characters, and much, much more!

If you'd like to learn more about the other characters mentioned in A ROGUE WORTH THE RISK who have their books, here they are.

Mercy and Ronan Brockman: [NO LADY FOR THE LORD](#), Daughters of Desire

Manchester, Marquess of Sterling: [A ROSE FOR A ROGUE](#), The Honorable Rogues®.

Sanford, Earl of Renshaw: Earl of Renshaw, Wicked Earls' Club-Coming January 2023.

Please consider telling other readers why you enjoyed this book by reviewing it. I also truly adore hearing from my readers. You can contact me on my [website](#) and, while you are there, explore my author world. If you enjoyed reading Corinna and Caspian's story, be sure to check out the other books in my [SEDUCTIVE SCOUNDRELS SERIES](#).

Hugs,

Collette

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Daughters of Desire (Scandalous Ladies), Book Two

She was only supposed to care for his wards...

not fall in love with him.

He was a carefree rogue...

Lord Ronan Brockman had a perfect life. Handsome, wealthy, and beholden to no one, he was charmed. But that was before he was unexpectedly named guardian to two young girls—and before he met their fascinating governess. Acting on his attraction to the witty beauty would be utter madness. Unfortunately, that doesn't seem to be enough to dissuade him from pursuing her...

She can never let her guard down...

Mercy Feathers knows more about responsibility than a rogue like Ronan could ever fathom. But to her *great* consternation, despite his *many* flaws, she wants him with an all-consuming passion that's as shocking as it is forbidden. It's just her misfortune that there's only one way a relationship with him could end—and it *isn't* with happily ever after...

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