

A woman with dark hair styled up, wearing a vibrant red, short-sleeved, floor-length gown with a gold belt, sits on a plush blue tufted sofa. She is looking upwards and to the left with a thoughtful expression. The background features a large window with a view of a snowy landscape, decorated with red and green floral garlands. A chandelier with blue and white lights hangs in the upper left corner.

*The most scandalous
Musgrave is back in town...*

USA Today Bestselling Author

SAMANTHA HOLT

Christmas with an
Earl's Son

Christmas with an Earl's Daughter

The Duchess's Investigative Society

Samantha Holt

Helstone Press

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Chapter One

“You’re no boxer, Basil.”

Dante glanced up. He didn’t need to, though. Only one person still called him Basil.

Dressed to perfection in a long, ruffle-trimmed pelisse, and a matching turban, and entirely unsuited to such a setting, his mother approached the bench on which Dante sat. He swung a glance at the boxing ring, pegged out in the middle of the room as the chap who was fighting staggered back under the weight of a punch.

“Neither are you, Mother,” Dante replied.

His mother, the Countess of Porchester seated herself next to him and they watched the match until the end. Dante spied his mother grimace as a companion scooped the loser up and dragged him off to be tended to.

“He’s quite a fighter,” she commented of the winner.

Dante nodded. “He’s unbeaten here.”

“You do not fancy your chances?”

Dante smirked. “Give me a sword over fists any day.”

He saw her shudder from the corner of his eye. He couldn’t resist giving his own little jab. It had been some time since he’d brawled with another man, but his family couldn’t seem to remember that. They still had him marked as the boy who’d caused a huge scandal years ago and been forced to gallivant about Europe so at the very least the *ton* could forget his actions.

The *ton*, however, was quick to leap onto any new gossip, most especially given how his sisters married advantageously in recent years. His time away had been fun but rather useless. No one wanted to forget he was the son of new money and a new title. They most especially didn’t want to forget what a supposedly scandalous family he came from.

Another two men took the center of the room and began dancing around each other. The thud of fists upon flesh and feet scuffing across the floor had become Dante’s companion of late. Every day this week, he’d visited the

boxing club in the heart of London. After all, it was the only damned place he could get peace.

At least until his mother swanned in here. He didn't even want to ask what she was doing here. She remained perched next to him, drawing gazes from many of the sweating hulks of men.

"What are you doing here, Mother?" he finally asked with a sigh.

She twisted her head away from the action. "The same thing that brings you here."

Dante arched a brow. "You are escaping the gossip columnists?"

"No."

The ravenous hordes of gossip tellers would not harangue his mother—the daughter of a duke—as they did him. Especially after the most recent furor surrounding Dante.

And if it was not the so-called journalists, it was his friends, his contemporaries, and most certainly his enemies reveling in his second downfall in a decade. If people were not delighting in it, they were appalled by it. Society had become almost unbearable—and that was saying something. He had sailed the rough seas of scandal and gossip with ease since his return from Europe.

This latest storm, however, would not be so easily calmed.

"I heard you were taking refuge." His mother leaned back against the bench, frowned, and studied nails that did not match her elegant attire. The stain of paint lingered, the only hint of the real woman behind the lavish garments. Why she felt the need to dress up to step inside a boxing club, he did not know, but his mother seldom did anything without reason.

"And apparently I cannot even find it here."

At this club, the men cared little about what tales surrounded a man's life. It was all about how well one could fight. For Dante, boxing had never held any appeal. He preferred the skill of fencing or the thrill of a horse race. He could fight when needed—and had to admit that there had been a few too many drunken nights when he'd had to use his fists. Despite his disinterest in participating in the sport, putting up a generous wager or several on some of the best fighters had made him a welcome sight at the club.

"I do not come to plague you about your recent misdeeds," his mother insisted.

"You would not be the first nor the last." Dante drew in a breath and released it slowly.

He'd survived any number of gossip columnists and near scandals over the years. Who would have thought the most recent would lead to his downfall? Even those friends who knew the real reason behind the news had thought to keep their distance, such was the taint. He cursed softly to himself. If only he had not been so arrogant to think the gossip would not touch him.

"I did, however, come to offer you a solution."

Dante peered at her. "You have a solution for the marauding gossips who are determined to make a martyr of me?"

She nodded confidently. "Go to the country estate until Christmas. The one in Monmouthshire. You can stay there for a while and let the furor die down."

Pushing a hand through his hair, Dante shook his head. He'd never set foot in Monmouthshire. The estate had been built while he'd been away.

So much had happened while he'd been away. Regret ate at his gut. He should have been here attending his sisters' weddings, to see his nieces and nephews when they were first born.

But he only had himself to blame.

"I had to escape to Europe last time. You are suggesting a mere jaunt to Wales will aid us in this matter?"

"It is not every day the son of an earl proposes to a courtesan and gets a high-borne woman *and* the courtesan in the family way all in one week."

"I did not get either of them in the family way, Mother."

Dante did not argue the fact. What was the point? He might have had no hand in getting either woman in such a state, but he had sworn to help them. If it had not been for some damned nosy reporter, the matter would have been settled quietly, both women would be able to have their children peacefully and been taken care of, and Dante could return to his life of parties and *careful* liaisons.

"We do have the house in Bath, you know," Dante pointed out.

His mother shrugged. "None quite far enough away from Town, however."

He could not deny that. Going to Bath was no good. Escaping such scandalous stories would prove no easier there than in Town. At least here the population was high enough that he could escape the scorn of all the protective mamas and angry fathers, not to mention all the journalists who wanted to fill the pages of their latest gossip rag with more details of his terrible ways. He forgot Monmouthshire existed at times, but he was loath to run away.

“Why Monmouthshire?” he asked. “Ivy and Cillian have a house in Devon. Surely that would be a better place to go.”

“Well, my darling,” she laced her gloved hands over one knee, “Monmouthshire could cure you of your problems entirely.”

“Mother...” he said in a warning tone. His mother could usually be counted on to get to the point rather swiftly and sometimes a little brutally. He had to wonder why she was dancing about it now.

She chuckled at Dante’s annoyance. “There is a young lady—the daughter of a friend—who has also found herself in a rather uncomfortable situation.”

Realization struck, and Dante straightened. “I am not marrying.” Dante had spent long enough cherishing his bachelorhood. He was not going to give it up now just because of one little error. He had plenty of time to worry about the state of matrimony.

“The young lady,” she continued, ignoring him, “found herself in a situation not of her doing. The cad who forced himself upon her has fled, so there is no saving her reputation. Unless, of course, she marries well.”

“If I wanted to marry, I have two women with whom Society has linked me forever. I could pick one of those.”

“Except, of course, that neither will have you.”

“I am Viscount Southwick. You know well enough, no woman in her right mind would turn me down.”

“Even if both of those women know you had nothing to do with their situations?” His mother smiled slowly.

“Why are you so certain it was not me? I’ve been responsible enough for half the scandal facing our family.”

“I know you, darling, and I know the errors in your personality.”

“Errors? Lovely, thank you, Mother.”

“And I know you are a good man at heart and would not leave a woman in such a way.”

Dante grunted. “Many other people would disagree.”

“Even Lord Rutley.”

Dante clenched his teeth. Lord Rutley. The bastard who had put him in this situation in the first place. When Lady Rutley had come to him, devastated by the news of her husband’s affairs, Dante considered he had little choice. He had to take the blame for Rutley’s mistakes. After all, it was just one more stain on his already scandalous reputation. What difference would it make?

A big one, apparently. His previous carefree, rather enjoyable life had

changed drastically. And now he had to resort to hiding at boxing saloons.

You're in a pickle, darling," his mother said softly. "Let me help you."

Dante faced her head on. "You know, Mother, I never thought you would be the sort to push for an arranged marriage."

After all, she was rather known for turning her back on society and marrying a man simply for love. The fact Dante's father had later become an earl never quite assuaged Society.

She made a dismissive sound. "It's not an arranged marriage."

"A marriage of convenience, then."

"Oh, it's not that either."

Dante eyed his mother's smug expression. Of course, it had passed oh so briefly through his mind that marriage to a lady from a good family would fix many of his problems. After his nuptials, he would likely be welcomed back into Society with open arms. But his life as he knew it would be over. He did not like the idea of his hand being forced nor did he like the notion that he would have to become a staid married man.

"Really? Then how would you describe it?"

"An opportunity."

"What even happened to this girl that she cannot find another suitor? And what makes you think she would accept me after all that has happened?"

"From what her father tells me, some cad forced a kiss upon her. It was interrupted by a notorious gossip. I have no doubt the—" she leaned in "*—bastard* would have done worse had he not been caught but Phoebe bore the brunt of the blame, especially when the man made a quick exit to goodness knows where."

Dante curled a fist, unable to even take amusement in the dulcet utterance of the word *bastard*. It was not as though he did not sneak kisses where he could, but he would never force his attentions on a woman, nor would he be foolish enough to kiss an innocent somewhere they could be caught. Men like that gave rogues like him a bad reputation. He hated that they existed in the same world as his sisters and thanked the lord none of them had ever been unfortunate enough to suffer a similar situation.

"That is unfortunate for the lady," Dante murmured.

"She is a pretty young girl, with a good family name, but the family is not as rich as some and the dowry is paltry. It would take a certain sort of man to rescue her."

"We're the scandalous Musgraves," he pointed out. "Do you really think I

am in the sort of position to rescue anyone?”

“Your sisters have all married well and we are able to hold our heads high in London once again.”

“Speak for yourself,” he muttered.

“And when you marry this sweet girl with an excellent family, you shall be able to as well.”

He sighed and pressed his fingers to either side of his head. It wasn't like his mother to speak so much sense. Not that she was any sort of fool but after his time away, he was rather used to making decisions alone with only vague murmurings of life in Bath and descriptions of her latest paintings.

“I have yet to see why I should do this.”

“Because,” his mother said, “you can marry this girl, set her up in a house in Monmouthshire and then get back to your life in London with your reputation restored.”

“After marrying a stranger?”

“Think on it, darling. You will no longer be hounded by the mamas of the *ton* looking for a husband for their daughters and with sons, your future fortunes will be secure, *and* you will solve your current predicament.” She rose slowly and straightened the edges of her coat. “You were always going to have to marry eventually, Basil, and this seems a better solution than hiding out in places like this.”

Dante glanced up at her and released a long breath. This was not how he had intended to be persuaded into matrimony. If at all. Heck, he was only thirty. Plenty more years to sire an heir. Even if he grew old and crotchety, there would be many more women looking to leap into his arms in the hopes of a comfortable life thanks to his wealth. He glanced around the dusty room and drew in the bitter scent of sweat.

“She's pretty?” he asked.

She nodded. “Very. And well-mannered. She will make an excellent wife and expect little from you.”

He glanced at the boxing ring, then back to his mother. The gossip would fade eventually, surely?

“Mother, I cannot marry a stranger simply because of some gossip.”

The countess's expression grew serious. “These people are good people, Basil.”

“Dante.”

“And they were most kind to us when we first bought the estate in Wales.

Without them, we might not have found acceptance in the area. Our reputation still proceeded us.”

With a sigh, he pinched the bridge of his nose. A reputation he’d done well in securing.

“They deserve better,” she continued.

“They deserve me?” he scoffed. “I think there will be many people who disagree with you.”

“You are a gentleman at heart, *Dante*. We both know that. Which is why I know you shall do the right thing. Imagine if your sisters were in such a situation.”

Perfect. Bringing his sisters into this struck him right in the heart, and his mother knew that. The very thought of such a thing happening to any of his sisters made him want to get up in the ring and fling fists.

“That’s unfair, Mother.”

“They have no one to defend them.”

He met his mother’s troubled gaze. The guilt remained firmly lodged in his chest no matter how hard he tried to shift it. He’d let his family down with his behavior and failed to be there to protect his sisters when they needed him. Perhaps if he did this, he could somehow make amends.

Dante swallowed hard, unable to believe he was going to agree to this. “Very well then. I shall make arrangements to leave on the morrow.”

Her grin widened. “Excellent.” She adjusted the seams of her gloves. “The house is already expecting you, so the staff will be ready.”

“Were you so certain I would say yes?”

Mother cocked her head slightly. “Am I ever uncertain of anything?”

Dante grunted—his only response.

“There is one thing...” She smiled brightly. “You should wed her by Christmas.”

“Christmas? That’s scarcely two months away.”

“Then we can all be together in Bath with your new wife without fear of, well, your reputation ruining anything.”

“I am banned from celebrating Christmas with the family until I marry. Is that what you are saying?”

For the first time since she’d sat down, he noticed the dark shadows around her eye, indicative of too many late nights.

Worrying about him probably. Damn it.

“We all know the truth of the matter, darling, but your sisters have fine

husbands and children to think of. This most recent scandal should not be allowed to touch them.”

“Fine.” He waved a hand. “I’ll get a special license and wed this woman.”

“And one other thing…”

Heart sinking in the direction of his toes, Dante straightened his shoulders. This situation could not get much worse. Whatever she had to say, he was ready for it.

“Miss Phoebe does not know you will be there to marry her. Her father tells me she is being stubborn and will not accept any form of marriage proposal.”

“Damn it, Mother, do not tell me I have to woo her?”

Her grin turned wry. “You are a charming man, darling. When you are not cursing, of course. I have no doubt you will be able to persuade her an arrangement between yourselves would be highly beneficial.”

Groaning inwardly, he ran a hand over his face and watched his mother swan out of the room as though followed by a retinue of servants bowing to her every need. Most of the men paused to watch her too. They, of course, could have no idea what she had just done, and Dante wasn’t quite certain what had happened either. Somehow, he’d found himself in such a position that he was not only going to have to wed a woman he’d never met but court her too.

And with how things so often went for the Musgraves, he wasn’t certain this would end well.

Chapter Two

Maddie pulled the collar of her pelisse closer and tightened the ribbons of her hat. She felt the grips tug at her hair as the wind beating through the trees threatened to tear it from her scalp. Overhead, what leaves remained on the trees rustled and those that had given up trying to beat winter crunched underfoot.

She shivered and trudged on, slipping the book she clutched under the fold of her coat to protect it. If Mama were here, she would scold her for traipsing out under the threat of rain, but she needed air—even if it was near frigid air. It was preferable to the stale air of the house, which was becoming ever staler at present.

Drawing in a breath, she ducked her head and pushed farther into the woods. She followed the main road that sliced through the trees on a raised embankment. Her boot sank into the mud cut by carts and carriages, so she stepped to the side of the embankment where fallen leaves offered a protective blanket for her hem.

Determined to keep up a furious pace, her cheeks warmed, and her limbs heated until she had to pause for a breath. She stopped and lifted her head to eye the white skies, thick with clouds. A hint of gray lingered near the horizon. If she was lucky, rain was on its way. If she was unlucky, it would be snow. She should turn back.

Maddie exhaled. Just a few more steps—maybe another mile or so—then she would return. Sitting around in the house was not her idea of fun but her Papa had insisted Phoebe remain inside until they figured out what to do with her, and Maddie really should remain at her sister's side.

She curled a fist and tears of frustration simmered in the corners of her eye. How unfair the world was. Her sister deserved so much better than some...some bastard pushing himself upon her and ruining all chances of happiness. Maddie swallowed. How she had hoped her sister would marry for love—unlike her.

Swiping at her eyes, she followed the road as it curved past logs stacked high by the woodcutters. The road continued through the forest and would come out near the village. She could not bear any of the gossip, so would have to turn back before she reached it, but she had a little way to go before she saw civilization.

She peered at the sky again and shook her head. What would her late husband think of all of this? He would probably tell her to cease being ridiculous, but he never could stand a fuss. Her sister was ruined, and all by a man Maddie would not wish upon anyone.

She supposed at least the man had not offered for her hand. It might have saved Phoebe from scandal, but Maddie couldn't stand the thought of her sister being forced to marry such a man.

Of course, there had been that rumor of a match with some lord which had not come to fruition. Though, at this point, as much as Maddie wanted love for her sister, an arranged marriage almost felt acceptable. It seemed to her that happy matches were scarce. Her parents had a fondness for one another, but their marriage was often fettered by disagreements. Her own brief marriage had hardly been one of joy and contentment.

Unlike Maddie, Phoebe refused to consider marrying anyone her parents suggested anyway and few of those men would take her on with such a minimal dowry. If only Maddie's late husband had left her with more money. As it was, most of her husband's modest wealth had passed to her husband's brother, and that left Maddie with just enough to keep a small house and housekeeper. She'd scarcely seen that home these past days. Her father and sister needed her too much.

Having nearly reached the end of the road, Maddie stopped. She wrapped her arms about the book, cradling it close, and allowed her heavy breathing to slow. The trees broke, and the road sloped toward the village, revealing white cottages nestled against the valley. Green fields stretched out toward the horizon and the spire of the church thrust proudly upward.

She squinted into the distance. A man upon horseback emerged from between the houses and continued toward her position. She could not make out who it was, but she was not in the mood to converse with any of the villagers at present, especially when most would pour judgement upon her sister or simply ask as many questions as they could so they would have some gossip to take back to their friends.

She shook her head and turned swiftly on her heel. If she hurried, she

could duck into the trees and avoid conversation.

“Oh!”

Mud gave way beneath her heel. Her heart skipped against her chest. She grabbed for a tree branch at the side of the road. It breezed past her fingertips as her body followed the movement of her foot.

For a few moments, she wavered, the sharp drop from the side of the road beckoning her forward into the shadows between the trees at the roadside. A cry escaped her as her balance failed and she fell onto her side. The world blurred around her, and she rolled down the embankment.

She ended her fall with a painful thud against the base of a tree. Wincing, she lifted her head and surveyed her surroundings—she had landed in a deep ditch surrounded by dense foliage and an incline that was difficult to climb out of.

Sticky mud clung to her palms as she pushed herself up with a wince, her fingers sinking into the mud. Her ribs panged from where she had connected with the tree trunk. She glanced around to see the book wedged between two trees.

Maddie issued a long breath. At least it wasn't caked in mud. Unlike her.

“Are you well?”

She peered up. A gentleman hastened down the embankment. The rider, she assumed. Certainly not one of the villagers. She pushed herself to standing and glanced down at her mud-caked attire.

“Yes, yes I am—”

He paused in front of her, his hands outstretched. His gaze connected with hers and any miniscule amount of air she had left in her froze. The throbbing ache vanished. A gaze bluer than any she had ever seen connected with hers.

When she wrenched her gaze from his, she noted a strong jaw, long nose, and lips that were too beautiful for a man and yet utterly perfect in his features. He had to be the most handsome man she had ever seen. A knot began to jam itself in her throat. His eyes seemed to darken when she lifted her gaze back to his.

She opened her mouth to say something, but no words came out. Her brain was utterly devoid of anything other than one thought. *Goodness, he's handsome.* It kept circulating over and over. Sometimes in variations. *Goodness, goodness, goodness.* But it always ended with one word. *Handsome.*

Under his hat, chestnut hair skimmed his collar. She wrenched her gaze

from his and took in the rest of his appearance. Well-fitted breeches, a tailored coat, the hint of a waistcoat behind the lapels. Broad shoulders. Broad, *broad* shoulders. Her mouth dried further.

She'd been wrong. He was not handsome. He was beautiful.

For a moment, she wondered if she'd conjured him up or perhaps she had hit her head too hard but then she spotted the small scar upon his chin and concluded a brain addled by a fall wouldn't make up such details.

Maddie could not say how much time had passed. Perhaps it was seconds. Maybe minutes. It could be hours. She had the awful feeling she could stare at this man for that long and not notice the passing of time at all. She tried to swallow the knot in her throat, but it would not budge. His gaze flitted over her, and heat flooded her cheeks as she recalled her filthy state. She peered down and winced. Yes, it was as bad as she feared.

Glancing up, she saw his Adam's apple bob before he reached out again. "I saw you fall. Are you well?"

"I—"

He took her arm and she nearly recoiled. But not from repulsion. Oh no. The mere touch of his gloves to her pelisse made it feel as though he might as well have touched fingers to bare flesh. Goodness, what on earth was happening?

She cleared her throat and let him take her arm, steeling herself against the strange sensation. Did he feel it too? He did not look like the sort of man who would be discomfited by a woman's presence or the mere touch of a hand to an arm, but she had seen him flinch.

"Let me aid you," he offered.

"Oh, my book!"

"Allow me." He eased the book out from between the trees and dusted the leather jacket down with a gloved hand. "No harm done I think."

Maddie held her breath. Handsome and careful with books? Was this man sent to her from heaven?

No, don't be ridiculous. There were plenty of men who liked books and the last time she'd trusted a man who claimed he liked books, he wound up ruining her sister.

She accepted this man's help in silence, though, allowing him to assist her to the top of the embankment. She straightened her pelisse and willed the heat flowing through her body to disperse. *Goodness, he's handsome.*

No. *Beautiful*, her inner voice corrected.

The gentleman reached out to her and plucked a leaf from her hair. She had no doubt she was blushing more than an innocent on her wedding night. What must the stranger think of her? She had to find some words. Any words. *Thank him, Grace.* How hard could that be?

“Thank—” The second word jammed in her throat. Very hard, apparently. She gulped and tried again. “Thank you for your aid. I slipped on some mud you see. I am not normally so clumsy, but the ground is wet and—” She shut her mouth. Good Lord, she only wanted a few words, not one hundred all in one go!

“It is a fine job I saw you fall. This road does not look as though it is travelled often.”

His voice was warm and soothing with an inflection of charm that made her insides twist. He carried himself with utter confidence and yet there was some strange hint of vulnerability whenever he met her gaze. His horse shifted impatiently, giving a slight huff.

“I would not delay you,” she said, too aware of the reluctance behind her tone and praying he could not hear it.

This was ridiculous. He was a stranger and yet she could not help wanting him to remain a little longer so that she could at least ask his name or find out where he was travelling.

“Where were you going? Can I aid you home?”

She could not say no even if she wanted to. “I was returning to my father’s house. A mile or so up the road.” She thrust a hand in the direction of her parents’ house.

“Seeing as I am heading that way too, I would be much obliged if you let me escort you. You took quite a tumble.”

She blinked at the creases that appeared around his mouth when he smiled. His eyes warmed too. If she had thought him beautiful with his brow creased in concern, she could not even fathom what he was now. Something utterly indefinable. She managed to return his smile with a shaky one of her own.

“Thank you, I would appreciate that.”

“Can you walk?”

“I think so.” She tried not to imagine what he might do if she said no. Put her on the horse with him? Surely not? A man dressed the way he was had to be a gentleman. He wouldn’t consider having her so close.

Yet a not very rational part of her mind clung to the idea.

“I imagine you would like this back.” He ran a finger over the gold

lettering. “Gulliver’s Travels? Have you read it yet?”

“I just started it the other day. I’d rather hoped to find somewhere to sit and read it, but the weather looks to be turning.”

“It’s a fine book. You’ll enjoy it tremendously. Though, surely you would be more comfortable reading in front of a warm fire somewhere?”

“I like the outdoors.”

He gave a flash of a smile. “So do I.”

Her heart skipped. She glanced away.

The man took the horse’s reins, and she walked alongside the stranger, aware of the pound of her heart with every step she took. This was too bizarre. What did it matter if he was handsome? She had seen handsome men before. She’d even had one season in London before marrying and danced with many a fine man.

None so fine as this one, though. There was a confident air to him that had her insides unravelling. Her mouth remained dry and her mind a whirl of thoughts. She should ask him something, but she could not latch onto one question. Who was he? Why was he here?

Strangers in their small village were rare, particularly ones dressed as finely as this man. She snuck a glance at him and quickly looked away when she found him watching her. She estimated him to be a little older than her—by two or three years perhaps. She spotted a tiny hint of gray at his temples that told her he’d still be devastatingly handsome even in his old age. He was lucky enough to have the sort of features women both old and young could admire.

“What are you doing here?” The words escaped her rapidly and she sucked in a breath. “I mean, what brings you to Whitecastle?” She kept her gaze on the road ahead. She had already stared at him far too much as it was. “We do not see strangers here often.”

“I am visiting a local gentleman to discuss...business.” He paused, and she had to follow suit. “Are you quite well? That fall was rather spectacular.”

“Well, thank you.”

He chuckled. “Can I at least offer you my horse?”

She shook her head. The last thing she needed to be doing with her sore ribs was riding sidesaddle. “I am certain it looks worse than it was, despite my appearance.”

A smile curved his lips. “Well, you look quite well, despite the mud.”

Maddie felt the blush all the way to her toes. Handsome *and* charming.

Perhaps too charming. She'd already allowed herself to be fooled by the man who kissed Phoebe. She wouldn't let it happen a second time.

Chapter Three

Dante tried not to grin when he saw the stain turning the woman's cheeks rosy. He should not be grinning anyway. He was not here, in the midst of Monmouthshire, for this muddied and far too beautiful woman.

But, damn, was she beautiful. Even with her modest dress caked in mud and a few splatters on her cheek. Splatters that he had the irresistible urge to brush away.

When he'd seen her take a fall, he had no idea he would be rushing to the aid of such an astounding woman. Every time her gaze met his, his heart did a strange jolt and heat rolled through him. It was unfathomable really. He'd seen beautiful women, been with beautiful women. Yet none had ever had quite such an impact on him.

Perhaps it was shiny dark hair, slightly disheveled, that still managed to catch the light despite the rather dull day. Or those lips with the most incredible cupid's bow that made his fingers itch with the desire to trace them.

No, it was more likely to be her eyes—a deep forest green set amongst an almond shape that kept snaring his attention.

He peered at her again and met her gaze. She quickly glanced away. He gave into the smile forcing its way across his lips. Whatever the reason for his reaction to her, he could not help but like that she seemed to be feeling the same.

Dante gave himself a mental shake. His mother would not be impressed with him even thinking of flirting with this beautiful woman. Not when he was meant to be getting married by Christmas.

“So, um, who is this gentleman you are visiting? I might know him.”

“Mr. Cedric Bloomsbury. I was told in the village his house is not far from here.”

“Oh.” She stopped and laughed. “That is my father. I was just heading to his house.”

The news slammed into his gut like a punch. This was the daughter? The daughter that he was meant to be marrying to save from ruination? A laugh escaped him. He'd heard she was pretty.

She was more than pretty.

He supposed he could forgive the description. It would have been hard to quite put Miss Phoebe Bloomsbury's beauty into words, but a mere *pretty* did not do her justice. He was surprised by her maturity, though. He'd pictured some simple country lass, whereas this woman looked as though she had experienced a little bit of what life had to offer.

"Well, what a happy coincidence."

Her lips tilted in a lopsided smile. "It would be happier were I not covered in mud." She peered at him. "What business is it you have with my father? Forgive my curiosity, but he did not mention anyone coming to visit."

Dante hesitated. He could hardly tell her he was here to marry her—not outright at least—and certainly not until he had spoken with her father.

"A friend in London recommended him," he murmured, with little clue as to what Mr. Bloomsbury did for a living.

"Oh, yes, he travels down for work frequently."

Miss Phoebe led the way to a generously sized cottage topped with thatch. The gardens were a little wild, with ivy crawling up the walls, but it had a rustic charm to it.

"My father is likely in his study. Do come in." After showing him to the stables, she motioned inside and led him through a darkened hallway, past the stairs and to an open door. She rapped her knuckles against the door, and a gentleman with a shock of white hair lifted his head.

"Father, your friend...Oh, forgive me." A blush appeared on her cheeks. "It appears we were never introduced."

"Lord Southwick."

Her father's gaze flared slightly in recognition, and he hastened to his feet, stepping around the desk at which he had sat. Mr. Bloomsbury cleared his throat. "Lord Southwick, forgive me, I was not prepared..." He looked to his daughter. "Maddie, why do you not find your sister? I must talk with Lord Southwick, and then we shall join you for some tea."

Maddie? Dante scowled. That was not right. He was not meant to be marrying a Maddie.

Maddie nodded. "If I can find Phoebe. Goodness knows where she is. I have not seen her all morning."

Blast. Dante met Maddie's gaze and she smiled at him. His heart gave a thud that felt deep and low in his gut. Phoebe was the sister. Disappointment twisted itself around his gut with far more depth than it should have. After all, this was to be an arranged marriage. So long as the girl was pleasant enough, what did it matter?

"It was nice to meet you, Lord Southwick."

"Likewise." The word came out a little gruffer than he'd intended. He forced himself to look away from Maddie as she walked out of the hallway. There was no sense in admiring her any further.

"If you will just sit, my lord." Mr. Bloomsbury swiped his hands down his breeches. "You shall have to forgive the mess. I was not expecting you for another day."

"I thought my mother sent word of my arrival."

Mr. Bloomsbury shrugged. "Things are a little slow in our corner of the country, especially with the roads in such a muddy condition. News rarely reaches us for weeks but no doubt you shall get used to that now you are staying here." He gave a tense smile. "Though, I think we shall both have to hope that your visit is not prolonged."

As in Mr. Bloomsbury wanted his daughter married with haste. The itching, burning sensation in his gut increased. It had seemed simple enough. Meet this Phoebe, charm her swiftly, have a quick marriage and set her up in a house with everything a woman could want. They would meet enough times to ensure there were heirs and he could continue with his life.

But then he'd found Maddie covered in mud and leaves and a book...

He shook his head to himself. This was a business transaction. He might be known as a rogue, but he was no fool. He'd conducted many successful business transactions since returning from Europe and aiding his father. This would be no different.

Dante ducked into the study. Lit by several lamps but with no windows, the room offered up a small, gloomy space. Rolls of paper were scattered across the generous desk that dominated most of the space. A neglected cup of tea was revealed once Mr. Bloomsbury hastily pushed aside the various sketches of houses.

"Forgive the mess," he apologized. "As I said, we were not expecting you quite yet." Mr. Bloomsbury pulled a chair over to put it in front of his desk and motioned for Dante to sit. "Or at all, if I am honest. I did not expect an earl to be interested in my Phoebe, but your mother assures me this is

correct.”

The older man’s gray gaze bore into him. This might be a transaction, but it was clear the man cared for his daughter.

Dante nodded. “I am told she will make a fine wife and—” he sighed, regretting how much he was sounding like his mother “—it is about time I married.” He gave a tight smile. “I can assure you that I can provide her with a respectable and comfortable life.”

Inwardly, he could not help but grimace. How had it come to this? Mere months ago, he had been reveling in all the pleasures life in London could offer. Now he was here in the country, practically groveling for the hand of a woman he had never met.

“Phoebe is...a little stubborn at times.” Mr. Bloomsbury tugged out a handkerchief and dabbed his forehead with it. “I am sure your mother has not kept the circumstances of her current situation hidden from you.”

He hardly knew how to respond. It was not every day one spoke of the ruination of a girl with her father. “I am aware,” Dante replied stiffly.

“But she knows she cannot stay unmarried. And she is a good girl, truly. Knows how to run a house since her sister married.”

“Maddie is married?” Dante had to resist the desire to bite down on his tongue. Where the devil had that come from? It did not matter if she was or not and he certainly should not be referring to her by her first name after a mere stroll together.

Her father did not seem to notice the slip and gave a soft smile. “Maddie is widowed. She has been for a few years now. Mr. Seymour passed at a rather young age I am afraid.” He lowered his voice. “The sweating sickness,” he confided.

Dante made what he hoped were appropriately sympathetic noises, but he could not seem to crush the slightly victorious bounce of his heart. Poor Mr. Seymour, leaving a woman like that after what must have been a short marriage.

He would not leave her for anything.

Curling a fist, he tried to focus on Mr. Bloomsbury. Where that thought had come from, he did not know. Of course, he’d leave her. He was here for an arranged marriage and nothing more. To her sister no less. He needed to cease these odd thoughts right this second.

“Anyway,” Mr. Bloomsbury continued, “while I will try to persuade my daughter to accept your offer, I am afraid you will need to ensure that she is

amenable to the arrangement. This is not the medieval age, my lord, and while I regret that we fathers cannot arrange our daughters' futures entirely, it does not appeal to me to push her into something with which she is unhappy. I hope that you shall treat her well."

Despite the man's scrawny stature and slightly shaking hands, Dante vowed not to underestimate him. It would not be the first time he had run afoul of a father or two.

But he'd made a promise to his mother, and Miss Phoebe was in a tricky situation through no fault of her own. Dante could not claim to be a pariah, but it did not mean he did not have sympathy for her and anger at the man who left her in such circumstances.

"I assure you, she shall be treated with all the respect a countess is due."

Mr. Bloomsbury gave a relieved nod and dabbed at his forehead. "You seem a respectable man, my lord. I did have my doubts after that, um, mess in London, but I do not imagine your mother has ill intentions. She comes for tea whenever she is in the area, and we do so enjoy her company."

Clearly, Mr. Bloomsbury was desperate if he had heard of Dante's supposed misdeeds and still wanted him to marry Phoebe.

The man clapped his hands together. "Well, with any luck, Phoebe shall see the benefit of this arrangement and you shall be married in due time. I will, of course, give my blessing to this match. The girls' mother is in great distress and became quite ill due to this whole thing and has gone to stay with her sister in Cornwall of all places for the air."

Dante opened his mouth, not entirely sure what to say, but was saved by the door of the study slamming open. Phoebe stood in the doorway, her cheeks blotchy, her eyes wide and full of fury.

She sucked in a breath and thrust a finger at her father. "If you think I am marrying a stranger, you are mad, Papa."

Dante stared at her for a few moments. He opened his mouth. "I'm not marrying—"

She pushed past him and came to stand in front of the desk. "I already told you I would not marry for anything other than love. You have always known that. If I did not want Mr. Woodward, why would I want someone else?"

"Phoebe," her father hissed. "This is Lord Southwick. A far better prospect than Mr. Woodward."

She swung her heated gaze on him. Phoebe? He took in the same dark hair and the curving lips. Not Maddie. But she looked like Maddie. He resisted

the desire to slam a palm to his forehead. Twins. But of course. Why would they not be twins?

Dear God, he really wished he'd asked his mother a few more questions before agreeing to this farce.

"You think you can just walk in here and claim me for your wife? Is that right, Lord Southwick?"

Now he thought about it, her voice sounded slightly different and there were fewer freckles skipping across her nose. Maddie's tone was slightly huskier, the sort of sound that lured one in so one could not think of listening to anything but her.

Her hands moved to her hips. "You think because of my...my circumstances that you can do whatever you wish with me? That you shall have a meek and obedient wife to do your bidding?"

Dante pressed his lips together to suppress a grin. "Not anymore I do not."

"If I were you, Lord Southwick," she continued, barely pausing to draw breath, "I would turn around and head back to wherever you came from. I have no interest in marrying you, even if you are the son of an earl. I will not be persuaded."

"Phoebe," Mr. Bloomsbury pleaded.

"Go home, Lord Southwick," she practically spat before sweeping out of the room.

Dante forced away the amusement from his expression as he eyed the empty doorway. Phoebe Bloomsbury was as beautiful as her sister but also as unattached to the idea of an arranged marriage as he had been warned.

Mr. Bloomsbury swiped his forehead with his handkerchief. "Forgive me, my lord, and forgive my daughter. These have been an upsetting few weeks for her. I am certain that once she settles into the idea..."

The temptation to run from this whole situation had his feet twitching. But he'd run for long enough. Now was the time to stay and finally make his family proud.

"I shall try my best to assure her that this match will be beneficial to both of us."

Although it looked like he was going to have to try harder than he'd anticipated. That headstrong young woman was not going to be easily persuaded. Damn, he'd not intended to take forever about this, nor to have to do more than flash a few smiles and speak a handful of charming words.

He'd certainly not anticipated her having a most appealing sister. Even if

Phoebe had been keen on a match with him, he would still not be able to prevent himself from thinking of Maddie. Which was ridiculous really. If he was attracted to Maddie, he could be attracted to Phoebe, surely?

“I shall leave you now,” Dante offered. “I am sure you need to speak with your daughter. Perhaps I might return tomorrow?”

Mr. Bloomsbury nodded, relief revealing itself in the softened lines of his face. “I am gladdened that you are not frightened away.”

“It takes more than a furious young lady to frighten me, sir.”

Miss Phoebe’s father chuckled. “And Phoebe does do furious quite beautifully.”

“She does indeed,” Dante agreed.

“Well, why do you not return for tea tomorrow? We may have some visitors and that will ensure Phoebe’s civility.”

“Will Maddie...I mean, Mrs. Seymour be in attendance?” Dante asked before he could stop himself.

“Oh, yes. Madelene visits us most days.” Apparently, Mr. Bloomsbury did not register the strangeness of such a question.

“I shall see you all tomorrow then.” Dante left before he could ask any more questions about the woman that he was *not* meant to be marrying. What the devil was wrong with him?

He had only made it out of the garden fence before someone called his name. Although he had known her for a mere hour or so, her voice sent a dart of anticipation coiling through his body.

He turned to see Maddie—clean and in a fresh gown—hastening down the garden path toward him. Her hair remained disheveled, with strands loose around her neck. This new gown was a fresh lemon color that followed the lines of her curves just perfectly. When she ran, her thighs pressed up against the thin fabric of her skirt and he had to force his gaze away or else he’d continue down the path of imagining her naked.

He should not be imagining his intended’s sister naked. Not one bit.

But damn...

Maddie took a long breath and stopped in front of him. “Please do not be frightened off,” she spilled out.

Dante chuckled. “I am not frightened off.”

“Oh good. I thought...” Her gaze latched onto his and he found himself sinking.

His knees grew soft, as though no longer capable of supporting him. He

could not help eyeing her lips, tracing their curve, and imagining their taste. He brought his gaze back to her eyes and spied the recognition that sparked there. She was thinking the same. There was no doubt in his mind.

Dante grabbed her arms before he could quite fathom that her skin was warm through the fabric of her gown. She inhaled sharply, her eyes widening. His mouth ended up on hers with the same swiftness and she made another startled sound. There was no hesitance, though.

Her mouth moved against his, sweet and warm, and forceful. In mere seconds, he was tasting her. When he released her arms to draw her closer, she flung her arms around his neck and urged him down to meet her so that not a jot of air sat between them.

His mind whirled. Every inch of him grew heated. With a growl, he pressed deeper, taking every sweep of her tongue, reveling in the deliciousness of her. He could swear he could kiss her all day long and never tire of it.

Her breasts crushed into his chest, her hips aligned with his. She inched herself into him, rocking. He groaned.

Never would he regret a sound more. Her hands unlatched from around him and she stumbled back, forcing him to release her. She clapped a hand over her mouth.

“What...? Oh...goodness...”

Her cheeks were rosy, and her chest flushed. Dante sucked in gulps of air and straightened his hat. He had to ball his hands into fists to prevent himself from reaching for her again. It was too hard to sift through his jumble of thoughts but most of them consisted of reliving that kiss that was far too short and wondering when he could get another.

Except he could not.

He was not here for Maddie. He was here for...

“Phoebe,” she said softly, as though reading his thoughts. “You’re meant for Phoebe.”

Straightening, he nodded. “Yes. Forgive me. That was...”

“Inappropriate.”

Wonderful. Crazy. Delicious. “Utterly inappropriate.” He gave a stilted laugh. “The country air must be going to my head.”

Maddie smiled tightly and looked at her feet. “Yes, yes. It must be that and that fall...it probably left me a little...um...” She went to turn away but paused, finally meeting his gaze head on.

Blast, those eyes seem to delve deep into his soul and etch a little pattern on his heart. He suspected it would read Maddie if anyone decided to look. What the devil was going on?

“You will return, will you not? Phoebe...she needs you.”

The shaky quality of her voice clamped around his heart. “Yes, of course. It takes more than an angry woman to scare me off.”

She nodded firmly. “Good. Excellent. I shall see you tomorrow then, Lord Southwick.” She gave an awkward dip and scurried away.

He should not but he could not help but watch her head back toward the house. His insides bunched uncomfortably. He’d return tomorrow and do as he promised—persuade Phoebe into matrimony.

But he’d be damned if he ever forgot that kiss. He shook his head to himself as he walked away from the house toward the modest stables. It was hard to fathom it, but he had never kissed a woman like that. Throughout all his years of spending time in the company of women, he’d never kissed one he had known mere hours, nor had he been swept up so fully. Something strange was afoot here. Something was casting a spell over him.

That something was Maddie.

Chapter Four

Maddie pressed herself against the front door and drew in several long breaths. She flattened a palm against her chest. Why would her heart not stop pounding?

She shook her head at herself. She knew why. That kiss. She touched her lips, still swollen and warm. She could taste him. If she closed her eyes, she would be able to recall the feeling of his hard body against hers. Several years of being a widow and she had never touched another man. She'd had no interest in one.

Until Lord Southwick.

What had she been thinking, kissing him so wantonly? She swallowed and forced herself away from the cold hardness of the door. What had she been thinking, kissing him at all?

Except he had invited it. *He'd* been the one to take her in his arms. And to press his lips to hers.

"Liar," she muttered to herself as she strode upstairs. *She'd* invited it. She'd practically begged him, even if she had said nothing. And damn him, he'd been able to somehow understand her silent plea.

How could she go and kiss a complete stranger?

Whatever was happening between them was hardly comprehensible and it was not at all acceptable. Lord Southwick should marry Phoebe. It was becoming obvious they had no other choice. Her sister could not survive a life of ruination and Maddie had no desire to watch her sister go through that. Marriage to a handsome lord no less would save her sister and give her everything she deserved.

Stopping at the top step, she gripped the banister until her knuckles turned white. She scrunched her eyes tightly closed, trying to remove the image of the way his cobalt gaze darkened when he looked at her. She wrenched open her eyes. It was no good. She could not forget his desirous look.

Maddie pressed an unsteady hand to her mouth. This was not common

behavior for her. Although she was only an hour older than Phoebe, she was technically the older sister, and she adopted that role somehow. Where Phoebe was impetuous, she was sensible. It was just how they had always worked as twin sisters.

But this could not be normal for him either, surely? He had been so gentlemanly upon their first meeting. Some strangeness had overcome them both so whether she could forget it or not, she had to shove it aside and remind herself why he was here.

For Phoebe.

Maddie released her tight grip on the banister and made her way to her sister's bedroom. Once upon a time they had shared that room, cozying up together on cold nights and imparting all sorts of sisterly secrets. Since Maddie's widowhood, she spent much time in the family home, but Phoebe told her few secrets these days.

The ruination had made her sister hard and angry. Maddie could hardly blame her. The bastard of a man had taken what he wanted and left Phoebe to suffer the consequences alone.

Although, now Lord Southwick had arrived, Maddie could not help but think that at least he was better than horrible Mr. Woodward. The man had arrived at the village a few months ago and any mirage of gentlemanly behavior had vanished when he forced a kiss on her sister.

A marriage to him was far less than Phoebe deserved. The youngest Bloomsbury twin always had the most charming manners and sense of humor. Everyone in the community expected an excellent match for her.

A match like Lord Southwick would be more than excellent for her.

She bit down on her bottom lip and tapped lightly on the door. A match like Lord Southwick would save Phoebe from Maddie's own mistake. Phoebe would never have been alone with the man had Maddie not asked her to speak with him.

Maddie waited, listening. There was a shuffling sound, but nothing else. She twisted the doorknob and pushed the door open. Phoebe lifted her head from her pillow and scowled.

"Go away, Maddie."

Approaching slowly, Maddie eased herself onto the bed next to her sister. She lay on her back and eyed the ceiling. Several moments passed and Phoebe kept her face pressed into the pillow. Maddie laced her fingers over her stomach.

“Do you remember when we painted the ceiling?” Maddie eyed the dark patches of color that were still visible, even though their mother had ordered them to scrub it all straight off.

Phoebe rolled over slowly and moved onto her back. She stared straight at the marks that two ten-year-old girls had left. Maddie saw Phoebe’s lips curve in the corner of her vision.

“Mama was so furious.”

Maddie chuckled. “She blamed me entirely.”

“You were meant to be the older, responsible one.”

Maddie winced. Whether it was an innate part of her or whether she had adopted that role simply because of that one hour, it was hard to say, but Maddie had taken her duties seriously as a child, and that hadn’t changed. Phoebe was the one who needed looking after whilst Maddie could be relied upon to make all the right decisions.

And that certainly meant no kissing the man who intended to marry her sister. She eyed the faint marks. Apparently, that naughty ten-year-old still resided in her.

Phoebe twisted onto her side, and Maddie turned to face her. “You always were the responsible one. We both know it was me who started the painting first.”

“You were very persuasive,” Maddie agreed.

“You keep putting me to shame, Maddie.”

Maddie scowled. “How so?”

“You did your duty. You married young and well.”

Maddie lifted onto her arm and propped her head onto a hand. “It was hardly the best decision I ever made.”

Phoebe sighed softly. “I know. Colin was a dullard and he stifled you. I wonder what you would have done had you not married him.”

“I’m hardly an ageing widow.”

“And yet you are still here, in Monmouthshire, ignoring your every desire to have adventures like the people in books.”

Maddie bit down on her lip. There were still times when she wished to climb hills other than the ones in Monmouthshire and to see the rest of what Britain and maybe even the world had to offer. But her family needed her. Especially now.

“Everyone considered what a good girl you were for finding an excellent match so soon.”

“I am not certain I would make the same decision now.”

“Yet you expect me to do my duty and marry a stranger.”

“There’s good reason to.”

Phoebe huffed. “Because everyone thinks I’m terrible.”

“They do not!”

“Ever since that horrible man put his disgusting lips on me almost no one will speak with me. Not even the ladies in my music group.” She huffed again. “Oh, if only I had not chosen to go outside. If only I had not—”

Maddie snatched her sister’s arm and pulled her back over to face her. “It was not your fault, it was mine. I should never have asked you to meet with him. And all for some silly book...”

“You love your books.”

“I do, but not enough to risk your welfare.” Maddie almost smiled at the way her sister uttered the words, as though it was perfectly reasonable to ask one’s sister to put herself in danger for a mere rare book. But Mr. Woodward had been promising to lend it to her ever since he arrived in Monmouthshire, and she saw no reason not to take him at his word. If she hadn’t been so busy dealing with Mama’s latest fainting fit, none of this would have happened.

“A lady should be able to borrow a book without fearing a man might force himself upon her,” Phoebe muttered.

“Entirely true,” Maddie concurred.

“I cannot help but wonder what his motivations were. He must have been quite enamored with you.”

Wrinkling her nose, she pictured Mr. Woodward and tried to recall their every interaction for some clue. Had he hoped to force *her* rather than her sister into marriage perhaps? She wasn’t certain why. By all accounts, the man was charming and everyone in the area enjoyed his company and spoke highly of him.

How wrong they had been.

“I should have seen through him,” Maddie muttered. “I should have known better.”

“You are not to blame for his behavior, Maddie.” Phoebe slipped her hand into Maddie’s. “It was to be an innocent meeting.”

“At least on my behalf.”

Her sister smirked. “He got quite the shock when he realized I was not you.”

“A shock enough that he ran away and vanished.”

“I’m glad he did not stay around or else I might have been forced to marry him.”

Maddie released her sister’s hand and wrapped an arm around Phoebe and cradled her close. “The situation is horrible and I’m so sorry for my part in this. But Lord Southwick seems a good man. And he is devilishly handsome. He could give you everything, Phoebe.”

“What if I do not want everything?” Phoebe asked, her words muffled as she buried her face against Maddie’s shoulder.

“As a ruined woman, you could end up with nothing. You would lose friends and family. As much as I hate to say it, I must be realistic. You would lose it all.”

“I would still have you, though.”

Maddie smiled at this. “You would. Always.”

Phoebe eased away from Maddie and sat. Maddie followed suit, taking Phoebe’s hand in hers.

“If only I could be like you, Maddie. I envy your freedom as a widow.”

Maddie shook her head. “The freedom is nice, but the widowhood is not so pleasant.”

Maddie was not lying for her sister’s sake. She enjoyed being able to do what she wished as a widow, but it could be lonely and stifling at times. She had no great wealth and no ability to fulfill her dreams so a quiet life in the countryside would have to do.

Not that she was ungrateful, of course. For all his faults, Colin had at least made certain she was taken care of.

Phoebe grimaced. “Forgive me. I am not thinking straight. Of course, it was not pleasant to lose a husband, regardless of the circumstances. But I still wish I could be free to do what I want.”

“I know.”

“Is Papa very angry with me?”

Maddie shook her head. “You know he cannot stay angry at you long.” Maddie squeezed her sister’s hand. “But you must give Lord Southwick a chance. He will return tomorrow and if you are not careful, he shall give you up entirely.”

“I do not see why he wishes to marry a woman he does not know. Surely the son of an earl could have his pick of women?”

Maddie lifted a shoulder. “Perhaps none appeal.”

Furrows appeared between Phoebe’s brows. “It still makes little sense to

me.” She tilted her head. “And you are not wrong. He is devilishly handsome. He would have no trouble finding a wife on the marriage mart.”

“Colin always said the marriage mart was the worst place to find a wife—that all the mamas thrust their daughters on unwilling men and that one could very well end up with a wife one loathed. Perhaps he wished to avoid that.”

“Colin didn’t want a wife. He wanted chattel.”

There was no denying that. And truth be told, Maddie had tried her hardest to be the meek, sweet wife he wanted. She suspected she’d succeeded too, but at what cost? Sometimes she still wasn’t certain she even knew who she was.

Maddie could not help having the same doubts as her sister, however. Why would such a man need to come all the way to Monmouthshire for a wife? It was hardly unusual for such men to pick women they hardly knew due to their status or family wealth but as beautiful, usually well-mannered, and as educated as Phoebe was, she was hardly the obvious choice for Lord Southwick.

And neither am I, Maddie reminded herself, when her mind flicked back to the kiss.

She pushed aside the memory of his lips upon hers and eyed her sister. “Just give him a chance. He is really quite nice.”

More than nice. He was charming and dashing, and a wonderful kisser. No, *wonderful* was putting it too mildly. Amazing...no, astounding. She pressed her lips together. Astonishing perhaps?

Even now, it made her stomach whirl. This sensation was too strange—and entirely unwanted.

Maddie turned her attention back to her sister. “Will you at least give the man a chance?” she asked.

Phoebe gave a shrug. “Will you ask father to reconsider?” She peered up, her eyes shimmering. “Please, Maddie? He always listens to you.”

“I shall talk to him,” Maddie vowed.

With a sigh, she rose from the bed. It was on her to fix this mess of her own doing, but her father would not change his mind, no matter what she said. What father in their right mind would? A rich and powerful man had offered for his ruined daughter. They could not ask for more.

Perhaps once the shock had subsided, Phoebe would realize this was her best chance at being saved. There could be future happiness in this match for Phoebe, Maddie was certain of it. She would hardly give up her twin sister to

a man she felt uncertain about, after all.

With any luck, Maddie would also forget that wretched, reckless kiss with a stranger soon enough. She wrapped her arms about herself as she stood and left the room. The oddest thing was Lord Southwick had not felt like a stranger. His arms about her had felt more familiar than her own and it had been like she had been waiting her whole life for that kiss.

She could hardly blame being some inexperienced girl, either. She was fully versed in ensuring her own pleasure. And whilst widowhood was not what she had ever intended for herself and was not full of the adventures she once dreamed of, she had plenty of friends and her volunteer work with the church kept her busy.

Maddie stopped by her father's office, then the drawing room, but he was nowhere to be seen. Catching sight of him in the garden through the drawing room window, she hastened outside and joined him as he followed the path that led around the country house.

The building had been in their family for many generations and showed its age, but it still made her heart warm to visit it. The generous cottage had given her many happy childhood memories.

"Is Phoebe still sulking?" Papa asked.

She nodded. "She wishes for me to talk to you."

"Talk me out of the arrangement you mean?"

"Yes," she confessed.

Her father paused and rubbed at a mark on one of the windows with his sleeve. "She must know I will not force her into anything she does not wish to do. But this match is an excellent one. It solves all our problems, and she will have a good life as part of the nobility." Her father looked at her. "It is more than we could ever have expected."

"I know." Maddie pursed her lips. "In truth, I cannot fathom why he should wish to marry Phoebe at all. As wonderful as she is, she is hardly the obvious choice."

Something flickered in her father's eyes, but he quickly glanced away and continued his walk along the path. Maddie hastened to match his pace. "I am assured he will take care of her."

"And if Phoebe continues to refuse him?"

Her father chuckled. "The viscount appears to be a charming man—and no doubt you did not fail to notice how handsome he is. I suspect Phoebe will change her mind quickly enough."

The thought made her stomach twist. This was what she wanted, of course it was. Her sister would be protected and no longer subject to scorn. Yet the idea that Phoebe would eventually fall for Lord Southwick sent jabs of pain needling across her body.

“I’m sure you are right, Papa,” she said softly. “But you must understand why she is upset.”

“We are all upset, Maddie,” he muttered. “This situation is untenable.”

“It wasn’t Phoebe’s fault.”

“We all know whose fault it was.”

He didn’t mean it was hers, yet Maddie felt the barb strike true and center in her heart. It hadn’t been the first time her passion for books had dropped her into trouble, yet who could have fathomed it would lead her here.

Or more to the point, Phoebe here. No matter what happened Maddie would never forgive herself for not seeing through Mr. Woodward’s book ruse to steal a kiss from her.

“Well, perhaps once your sister is married, she shall be able to find you a nice husband.”

Maddie shook her head. “You know I have no intention of marrying again.”

“I know.” He smiled. “You want a great love like in the books you read.”

“I could never settle for anything less now, Papa, you know that.”

“I do indeed.” He took her arm and linked it through his. “There are many excellent men around you know, Madelene. You have many years left, my dear, and I hate to think of you all alone once I am gone.”

“Do not speak of that. You have many years left too.”

“Not as many as you do, I am afraid. It would make my heart happy indeed if you found another husband.”

Maddie shoved aside any thought that Lord Southwick would be the sort of husband she would like. A man who kissed her as though she was as essential to him as breathing. A man whose gaze seemed to look deep into her heart and see all her secrets. That was what she had been waiting for.

Preposterous.

“What is, my dear?”

Maddie hesitated. She had not meant to say that aloud. “Nothing, Papa.” She forced a smile. “I was just considering how we would persuade Phoebe to be nice to Lord Southwick. Maybe if she gives him a chance, they will grow fond of one another.”

“We will need a miracle I think.”

And Maddie would need to forget kissing the man intended for her sister in the most rash action of her entire life.

She had a sinking feeling it wouldn't be easy.

Chapter Five

There had been a few times Dante had been ashamed of his behavior. Getting entirely too drunk and stripping naked in the middle of London as a young man had been the biggest regret of his life. Add that to a string of scandals to his family's name that ensured they were ousted from London, and it had taken the marriages of his sisters and many years for London society to accept the Musgraves back into the fold.

Opting for a gentle pace, he directed his horse down the winding lane. The horse's hooves crushed the fallen leaves as it trotted along. An abundance of lush, green grasses lined each side of its path, speckled with lingering dew. From his position, high in the saddle, he spied long stretches of fields extending out to rolling hills.

There was something to be said for a quiet country life, he had to admit. Away from the noise of London, it gave him time to dwell on the mistakes of his past and how he had ended up at this point. He had come to the conclusion he didn't much care what the *ton* thought by this point. However, the last thing he wanted was his once-again dented reputation harming his sisters or their families.

So he still needed to marry.

And he certainly did not need to add yet another scandal to his name. Kissing a woman he'd only just met was bad enough. It was even worse when one considered she was the sister of his intended.

Yet the same shame he'd felt when he fled England refused to lodge itself in his gut, no matter how hard he tried.

You'd kiss her again.

"Not helpful," he murmured to himself.

He *wouldn't* kiss Mrs. Seymour again and he doubted she would let him either, so that put an end to that.

Was this really worth all the effort, though?

Clearly, Miss Phoebe did not want him but maybe if he spent a few more

weeks out here, the scandals linked to his name would abate and he could continue on as normal. Heck, he might even enjoy a little time exploring Monmouthshire.

He passed through the already open gates to spy a carriage in front of the house. It didn't belong to his father and hardly anyone knew he was here as present, so he made quick work of bringing the horse around to the stables.

"We have visitors?" he asked the stable hand as he passed over the reins.

"Aye, my lord. Your sister and her husband."

"I have many sisters."

"Forgive me, my lord—Lord and Lady Blackthorpe."

"Ah." He tried not to play favorites, but he had always been closest to Lilly. His mother declared her a bad influence on him as a boy, but he adored his energetic older sister and being apart from her for so long in Europe had been no easy take.

"Thank you. I'll go and greet them."

Dante strode toward the house, smoothing down his coat and brushing off any stray bits of hay from his clothes. As he entered the grand entrance hall, he heard familiar voices coming from the drawing room.

"Lilly, August," he greeted his sister with a kiss on the cheek and her husband with a nod of his head. "What brings you to Wales?"

Lilly gave him an uncharacteristically tight smile, her gaze scanning his face before settling on his mouth. "We are on our way to Oakfield and decided to pay a visit."

Dante raised an eyebrow, sensing there was more to the story than that. "This is a little out of your way. Is everything all right?"

August cleared his throat, shifting slightly. "There may be some trouble on the horizon."

"What kind of trouble?"

Lilly took a deep breath, her gaze never leaving Dante's face. "There is talk of a price on your head."

He swung his gaze between his sister and her husband. "A what?"

"A price on your head," August repeated, sinking onto the sofa.

"What the devil have I done now?"

"Nothing," Lilly said firmly. "We all know that. But you are a Musgrave, Dante, and you know how it is—"

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Let me guess, I have done something else terrible?"

Lilly's throat bobbed. "According to the Scandal Sheets, you were seen with a certain debutante."

"I haven't even been in London for a week now."

She put a hand to his arm. "We all know that, and we know you would never do such a thing—"

August leaned forward on his seat. "But the debutante's father was heard offering payment to anyone who would call you out and ensure you did not survive a duel."

"Good Lord."

Dante's blood ran cold. It was one thing to be the subject of gossip and scandal, but to have a price on his head was something entirely different. He took a few deep breaths to calm himself before speaking. "Do we know who this father is?"

Lilly shook her head. "Not yet, but August has a few contacts in London who might be able to dig up some information."

Dante nodded. "Thank you, August. And thank you, Lilly, for coming all this way to warn me."

She gave him a small smile. "Of course. We won't let anything happen to you."

He knew his sister meant well, but he couldn't help feeling a sense of unease settle in his stomach. He had always been one for stirring up trouble, but this time it seemed like he had truly landed himself in hot water. He would have to be more careful from now on, and the last thing he wanted was his nieces and nephews paying for his mistakes.

"Looks as though I shall be staying here a while longer," he concluded.

And he needed a wife more than he realized. Any thoughts of giving up on Miss Phoebe were long gone after this news.

"It's not all doom and gloom though," Lilly said brightly. "I brought you pie!"

Dante gave her a bemused look as she pulled a neatly wrapped brown parcel from somewhere under the folds of her gown.

August gave his wife an affectionate look. "I told her you wouldn't be the slightest bit interested in pie at a time like this."

"Nonsense. Dante will eat anything."

Dante took the offering and opened it to reveal a perfectly baked apple pie. The sweet aroma wafted up to his nose and his stomach rumbled in response. He couldn't help but smile at his sister's thoughtfulness, even in the midst of

such troubling news.

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“I told you he’d eat anything.” She beamed. “Now, Mama says there is more to your escape here than simply trying to avoid any more scandal.” Lilly dropped onto the sofa next to her husband and laid a hand upon his thigh. “Is she worth all the trouble?”

Dante chuckled. He carefully placed the pie on the tray of partially filled teacups and rang the bell, though he didn’t think a fresh pot of tea was going to make him feel much better either.

“She seems quite pleasant.” If one did not count the whole declaring she’d never marry him and running off situation. “And I think she might just be the key to salvaging my reputation.”

August’s brows lifted. “Ah, so you’re finally admitting you have need of a wife.”

“I suppose I am.” Dante shrugged. “But, please, I’m already tired of this topic of conversation. Any subject other than marriage would be a most welcome diversion.”

“It is a rather important topic,” Lilly said. “It’s not every day one gets married, and to a stranger at that.”

“The *ton* will tell you otherwise,” August reminded his wife.

Lilly gave an unladylike snort. “The *ton* knows nothing of successful marriages and if they had it their way, all the Musgraves would be banished from England to some far-flung destination.”

“I tried that.” Dante chuckled dryly. “Worked for a while, but not long enough it seems.”

“That fact is, we were marked to be different from the start.”

“Thank the lord for that,” August declared.

His sister sent her husband a soft smile. Thank God his sisters had found good matches while he was gone. He wasn’t certain what he could have done as the scoundrel younger brother in terms of aiding them in finding good husbands and, frankly, all his sisters were so strong-minded, they wouldn’t have listened to him had he had anything useful to say anyway.

Being the younger brother to intelligent, determined sisters had its challenges. However, it came with many benefits too. He’d seen too many brothers turn gray with worry over their siblings, but he’d never had to fret for them.

“But my point is,” Lilly continued, “you could probably lead the life of a

saint and the taint of scandal will still linger about your name. No one liked that Mother married Father whilst he was still a humble businessman, and they certainly did not like that he was given his title by the Crown.”

“My supposed reputation never much bothered me until now. Leaving for Europe was more for the rest of you.” Dante leaned forward, elbows to his knees as he clasped his hands together. “But what of your children?”

August gave a strangled cough.

“Uh, Dante, I hasten to point this out, but August and I do not have any children.”

“Not yet, but the rest of our sisters are doing rather a fine job of bringing more Musgraves into the world.” He shook his head and issued a long breath. “I should hate for my apparent misdeeds to cause them any harm. Perhaps I should turn to travelling again.”

It seemed simpler than trying to win over a reluctant wife before Christmas and avoiding anyone who thought calling him out might be a fine way to earn some coin. For all he knew, a whole brigade of men were on their way to Monmouthshire to do battle with him.

Lilly straightened in her chair, her expression firm. “Certainly not. We only just got you back.”

“Agreed.”

Dante narrowed his gaze at August, knowing full well the man wouldn’t disagree with his wife, even if the occasion called for it. Sometimes having new brothers who were entirely devoted to his sisters was a pain in the rear. He’d imagined having a legion of men join the family might make his life easier but apparently not.

“None of us did anything wrong.” Lilly waved a hand. “The dog incident was—”

“An accident,” August finished for her.

“The day Father threw up on Lady Beaumont’s shoes was because he had —”

“Eaten bad fish,” August intoned, and Dante wondered how many times her husband had heard the tale of the Musgrave mistakes that had seen them suffer the cut.

“And—”

Holding up a hand, Dante shook his head. No one needed to hear his ridiculous tale of scandal again. He’d been a youth and encouraged to drink far more than he could handle. But he was done making excuses.

And perhaps Lilly was right. He was done running. Which meant he had to marry Miss Phoebe and hope his newly married status saved him from any further scandal and threats. No one would shoot a newlywed surely?

“And you are right,” he told his sister. “I won’t go back to travelling.”

She gave him a broad smile that confirmed his decision. He’d missed too much of his sisters’ lives and the last thing he wanted was to miss his nieces and nephews growing up too.

“So it’s settled then.” August gave a firm nod. “We’ll assist in finding out who the man is who is tossing about threats and in the meantime, you need to win over this Miss Phoebe.”

“Easy enough,” Dante said.

He’d won over enough women in his life. How difficult could it really be to sway a woman in need of a husband really? He should hardly give up at the first obstacle. He came from the sort of stock who never let anything stand in their way be it social divides or being sworn enemies.

Lilly rose and crossed the room to give him a quick hug. “We’ll always be here for you, Dante. And who knows, maybe Miss Phoebe is just what you need. Now this was to only be a flying visit as we need to make Oakfield before the weather turns. But you can write to us at the inn there.”

“And I’ll keep an ear to the ground in London,” August assured him as he rose.

After his sister and her husband left, he returned to the parlor room to find a fresh pot of tea. He caught sight of the apple pie still sitting on the tray and a small smile tugged at his lips.

Perhaps this situation was not all terrible. That was, if one did not count the fact he was going to have to marry a woman who did not want him and there were likely several people out there vying to call him out for a duel so they could put a bullet in him...

Chapter Six

“Why?”

Maddie clamped her mouth shut when the angry declaration bounced around the walls of the library. Tutting, she carefully pushed the corner of the page back into place and closed the book gently, handling it like a sleeping newborn as she slid it back onto the shelf. Why people could not use perfectly good bookmarks, she did not know. What was the need to desecrate a lovely book by folding the page corner?

She leaned out, grip firm on the ladder, to eye the grandfather clock in the corner of the library and squinted to make out the dark lines of the hands. Whatever the time was, it was probably time she returned home. Their neighbor Mr. Cole was terribly kind to let her spend hours in his private library, but she did not wish to outstay her welcome and, well, she was needed at home really.

With her sister.

Poor Phoebe was still in a state and Maddie did not blame her. That cad Mr. Woodward had not only frightened Phoebe, but he had also done irreparable damage to her reputation and now she was to be forced into a marriage with a man she did not know. Was it not enough that Phoebe had to live with the memory of his attentions being forced upon her? Why if she ever got her hands on that man...

She released her tight grip on the ladder when she spied the whitening of her knuckles and jumped swiftly down. This whole situation was miserable and even finding new books to read would not assuage the fury she felt bubbling inside her every time she thought of the damage that man had wrought.

How dare Mr. Woodward simply vanish after sweeping in and charming them all, leaving nothing but gossip and devastation in his path? If she were a man, she'd be travelling the country, hunting him down and—

If only she hadn't been so foolish. If only she hadn't agreed to meet him.

And if only Phoebe had not gone in her place...

Well, she wasn't certain what to do next. Calling him out didn't seem a good idea. She was about as good a shot as her father. And forcing him to marry Phoebe was a horrible idea too. What woman in their right mind would wish to wed the man who had accosted her?

Maddie made her way down the metal spiral staircase and scooped up the pile of books waiting patiently on the huge table that dominated one corner of the library. She released a wistful sigh and hugged the books close. If she could have one thing in life, it would be a library like this. But, alas, with a dowry like hers and no brothers, she'd be lucky to own a bookshelf let alone a huge library. Her father's small collection in his study was nothing compared to Mr. Cole's and she certainly had no space to house books.

Now if only Mr. Cole was in want of a wife. She chuckled to herself. He might be ancient and poor-sighted, but she reckoned she would marry almost anyone for such a library.

After retrieving her gloves and spencer jacket, she slipped out of the rear door of the manor house and made her way across the wild grassland, spying a herd of deer sheltering from the slowly warming sun under a large oak tree.

If she had not been so ambitious in carrying five heavy, leather-bound books home, she would be sorely tempted to take a walk up the hill to get a view of the valley. She'd seen it hundreds of times, but it had been raining the past few days, and she never tired of eyeing the expanse of land that allowed her to feel as small as an ant.

Phoebe never understood why Maddie might enjoy such a sensation, and that was no surprise. She and her sister never had the same opinion on anything. But to feel small meant nothing mattered. Not the cads of the world, not the worries for Phoebe's future. She was a mere speck and worrying over whether her family could survive the pending scandal seemed pointless.

It might also help her forget about that wretched kiss.

She slowed her pace and waved a hand when she spotted the farmer and his sheepdog following the same narrow path worn through the long grass. He greeted her with a tip of his hat.

"Good day, Mrs. Seymour. More books today, is it?"

She cradled the books close. "Indeed. You know I can never resist."

"I do indeed." He peered at her from under the brim of his hat. "I hear congratulations are in order."

“Thank you,” she said automatically, then frowned. “For what?”

“Miss Phoebe’s engagement, of course. About time one of you two wed. You’re the bonniest girls in Monmouthshire and any man would be lucky to have you.”

“Thank you,” she said again, then blinked, air trapping in her lungs. “Phoebe’s engagement?”

“The missus wouldn’t cease wittering on about it last night. Reckons she’ll be wed in the local church and wants to know if I’ll buy her a new hat.” He rolled his eyes. “But if it’s true, the man is the son of an earl, the last thing that they’ll want is a small ceremony.”

“I—” Maddie opened her mouth then closed it again.

Had word already spread about the arrival of Lord Southwick? She shouldn’t be surprised but nothing had been announced yet and who knew if Phoebe would even accept his offer.

She hoped Phoebe didn’t.

No. That’s not what she meant. Of course she wanted Phoebe to accept. What a life she would have as a countess. It was perfect for someone like her sister. Maddie certainly couldn’t imagine hosting balls and entrancing the *ton*, but Phoebe—yes—Phoebe was practically made for the role.

And her sister would be saved. Maddie couldn’t ask for anything more.

“I’ll, um, have to let your wife know,” she offered vaguely.

“Women and weddings,” he muttered. “It sends them all doolally.”

“I had best be going. Good day,” she managed to trill brightly, the sound at odds with the heavy sensation building in her chest.

She quickened her pace, the grass swishing past her skirts. If the farmer’s wife knew of Lord Southwick, then everyone would know soon enough, and once news of the engagement spread, it would have to go ahead by all accounts. Her sister would marry Lord Southwick and she would be saved. That was all there was to it.

Maddie’s heart raced as she walked faster. If only there was another way out of this situation.

She couldn’t bear the thought of her sister being forced into a loveless marriage just to save their family’s reputation. But she also knew that they didn’t have many other options. They were not wealthy enough to turn down such an advantageous match, and it wasn’t like her sister had other suitors waiting in the wings.

Her thoughts were interrupted when she heard footsteps swishing through

the grass behind her. She turned to see a tall, older man approaching. It was Mr. Poole, an old friend of the family's, though she never much liked him. He always patronized her and made little snide comments that he pretended were witty.

Her pulse quickened as she tried to think of an excuse to leave. Was she to run into everyone in Monmouthshire today? Her hope for the day had been to find some solitude to allow herself some time to think and hopefully forget her reckless behavior. But he was already upon her.

"Good day, Mrs. Seymour," he said smoothly. "I hope I'm not bothering you."

Maddie forced a smile. "Not at all, Mr. Poole. I was just on my way home."

"Books again?" He pointed with his walking stick toward the books she cradled close.

"Yes, Mr. Poole." She forced her gaze from his bushy white brows as he waggled them to the ruby pin in his cravat. Why his valet let him leave the house with such wayward eyebrows, she did not know.

"In my opinion it is a waste of time for young women to read," he declared as though he was announcing the introduction of some revolutionary new bill in Parliament.

"Well—"

"But I must ask, what is it that you find so fascinating in books?" he continued, ignoring her comment. "Is it the fanciful stories and unrealistic romances?"

Maddie bristled at his words. "Books provide knowledge and entertainment, Mr. Poole. They broaden one's horizons and allow one to explore different worlds and perspectives."

"Ah, but you must remember, Mrs. Seymour, that the world outside these pages is the only one that truly matters. And speaking of which, have you heard the news?"

Maddie's heart sank. "What news?"

"Lord Southwick has arrived in Monmouthshire. I heard that he is looking for a wife and has his sights set on one of the local ladies."

Maddie's stomach churned. The news really was everywhere. "Phoebe," she breathed out.

"So it's true."

She bit down on her tongue. Mr. Poole liked to gossip more than the

farmer's wife and it seemed she had just given him all the information he needed.

"It seems that your sister has caught the eye of a wealthy earl. Quite timely, I think, considering that disaster with Mr. Woodward, but why would a nobleman want her after such a torrid incident?"

Maddie straightened. "Phoebe did nothing wrong, and any man would be lucky to have her."

"Oh, please do not take offence, Mrs. Seymour. I only speak so bluntly of this as a concerned friend of the family. Your father should have caution where this man is concerned."

"My father is no foolish man," she responded swiftly. However, a niggle of doubt lingered low in her stomach.

Her father was desperate—goodness, they all were—so he might well accept Lord Southwick's offer to marry Phoebe regardless as to why a viscount would wish to make a simple country girl his bride.

"I will offer him counsel, do not fear, and if this Lord Southwick is indeed a man of good character, your sister shall be saved. It is just such a shame she thought Mr. Woodward might be lured in by such an act."

"Such an act? Mr. Poole—"

"Girls are simply not as they were when I was younger." He pointed to the books. "I blame all those romantic novels. They put silly ideas in their heads."

"Actually, these are—"

"To think, I believed Mr. Woodward to be quite set on you."

She didn't know what to say to this. The conclusion had been that Mr. Woodward had intended to kiss *her* and not Phoebe, and the offer of a rare book had been a ruse to lure her to meet him alone. Yet if he had truly been interested in her, he could have tried to court her normally. As near as she could tell, the man simply wanted to take advantage of someone and had singled her out for some reason.

"Now, of course, he has gone, shamed by such thoughtless behavior."

She gripped the books tighter, clamping her teeth together to prevent herself from saying something rude indeed. The coward had run as soon as he realized he kissed Phoebe and not Maddie. Who knew where he was.

As Mr. Poole continued to prattle on about the supposed virtues of the aristocracy, Maddie's mind began to wander. If only there was some way of restoring her sister's reputation and ensuring Mr. Woodward admitted that he

was at fault. Then Phoebe would not have to marry Lord Southwick, and then

Then what? Maddie would be free to kiss the Lord Southwick. Ridiculous.

“Mrs. Seymour? Is something the matter?” Mr. Poole’s voice broke through her thoughts, and Maddie blinked, realizing that she had been staring off into space.

“No, nothing’s the matter,” she said quickly. “I’m just...tired, I suppose.”

“Ah, well then, I won’t keep you any longer,” Mr. Poole said, tipping his hat. “Do tell your father I shall stop by to see him this week and we can discuss the matter of your sister then.”

Maddie quickened her pace, ignoring the desire to amble and admire the countryside. If she ran into someone else who had an opinion about her sister and this whole mess, she might well end up throwing her books at them and she never, ever mistreated books.

As she walked, she pondered on how to clear her sister’s name. Her mind went back to Mr. Woodward and the way he had taken advantage of her sister’s innocence. She wondered if she could somehow find a way to confront him and make him confess, to persuade everyone he was at fault.

But how? The woman always ended up ruined in such situations whilst the man walked away unscathed. She didn’t even know where he was.

The fact was, Phoebe needed to marry Lord Southwick and with any luck, they would turn out to be a fine match indeed. Maddie just had to focus on ensuring Phoebe gave the handsome lord a chance.

And Maddie needed to forget her own reckless behavior, starting right now.

Chapter Seven

All he had to do was not kiss Mrs. Seymour. Dante had spent much of his life not kissing women. Indeed, he had spent a lot of it kissing women too but how hard could it be to not kiss one particular woman?

Hard indeed, apparently. As soon as he stepped into the drawing room of the Bloomsbury house and set his gaze on her, he found himself recalling the taste of her lips and the feel of her body beneath his palms. She looked so like her sister, yet he had no trouble telling them apart. Mostly because when his gaze clashed with hers he saw the memory of their kiss written in her eyes.

Mr. Bloomsbury wrung his hands together and indicated to a chair, but Dante failed to hear what the man said. He assumed it was something like 'do sit', so Dante did so but it was damned near impossible to drag his gaze from Maddie.

No, he meant Mrs. Seymour.

Mrs. Seymour. He might have laid his lips upon her, but they were still not closely acquainted enough for first names. That had been his conclusion as he had rattled around the manor house, replaying kissing her over and over in his mind. He was half-tempted to have himself committed after a sleepless night filled entirely with Maddie.

Damn it. *No.* Mrs. Seymour.

If he kept reminding himself of that formality, perhaps that would help.

When he met her gaze for the third or fourth time, he feared his plan was for nought. The blush that lingered on her cheeks and the way she kept nibbling her bottom lip told him she had no better success at forgetting the kiss than he did. The fact that she shared in this madness did not help matters any. How much easier it would be if she had no interest in him.

How much better it would be if she made some attempt at not being beautiful too. Her hair caught the sunlight in the room, revealing glossiness that made his fingers twitch with the need to run his them through it.

It was definitely his imagination, but he kept thinking her lips were still

full and swollen from his bruising kiss.

Blast this whole situation. What sort of a true rake spent a night tossing and turning over one single lady?

“Phoebe will join us at any moment, I am sure,” Mr. Bloomsbury murmured.

It had taken Dante some time to realize his intended was not even in the room. Both father and sister remained standing, an uncomfortable air about them.

“Perhaps you would like some tea?” suggested Maddie.

“Certainly.” He smiled at her, and her cheeks reddened.

She poured for him and motioned to her father to sit. “Why do you not have a cup of tea, Papa, while I go and see what is delaying my sister?”

Her father nodded, the strain in his expression easing a little when he sat in the armchair opposite Dante. “You know how these girls are,” he said with a faint laugh. “Always spending too much time on their hair. Not that Phoebe is the vain type,” he added hastily.

Dante peered out of the window at the dull day. Steely clouds reached the horizon and the wind whistled through the cracks in the window. There was little to be seen from his position by the fireplace but if he did not look that way, he’d be guilty of following Maddie’s movements out of the room. He waited until he saw her leave from the periphery of his vision and turned his attention back to Mr. Bloomsbury.

“Are you enjoying your stay in Monmouthshire? And how is the house? Your father has improved the building since it was first built,” Mr. Bloomsbury commented.

“Indeed, it is a fine building.”

“Good.” Several moments passed and the sound of stomping about and muffled female voices came from upstairs. “You know how sisters are.” He gave a strained smile. “Always fighting.”

Dante had to suppress a smile at the idea of Maddie fighting with her grown-up sister. He had the oddest desire to find out more. What had Maddie been like as a child? What happened in the years since? Had she been happily married?

He winced inwardly. Their father would not be happy if Dante asked any of these questions of the wrong damned daughter.

Mr. Bloomsbury glanced at the door and leaned in a little. “I feel obliged to warn you, Lord Southwick, that my girls are not privy to much gossip. I

am not a fan of newspapers and society is a little...quieter here, shall we say.”

Well, at least he knew Phoebe’s objection to him had nothing to do with his reputation. And he’d be damned if he was not slightly glad Maddie had no knowledge of the recent scandals attached to his name. Her opinion should not matter, of course, yet it did.

He’d known the woman for a mere hour. What the devil was happening to him?

Well, he had kissed her too, he supposed. That very act offered a little more knowledge of a person than a brief walk through the countryside. Firstly, he learned she was passionate. Secondly, he understood how she responded to the intimate touch of a man. Dante had always rather preferred private moments with women over say socializing at balls and dinner parties.

He blamed growing up with four older sisters. He’d been witness to the laughter, the little moments between them as they embraced and talked of their hopes and dreams. He’d watched them soothe tears. Never once had he seen a man support another man in such a manner and he’d come to the conclusion he’d far rather spend his time with women than men who could scarcely manage more than a grunt at one another.

“I intend to keep those rumors from my daughters,” Mr. Bloomsbury continued. “I do not enjoy gossip and see no benefit in continuing to propagate such tales.”

“If Miss Phoebe and I are to marry, she will be exposed to the gossip surrounding me,” Dante reminded the man.

“Yes, I am aware of that. I am assured by your mother that you shall treat my daughter well, however, or else I would never have sanctioned this match.”

“I am many things, sir, but I have no intention of hurting anyone.”

It was true, after all. He still intended to have one of those marriages of convenience, but he’d live with far more discretion than he had previously. This mess back in London had taught him many lessons, and even the *ton* could not forgive every scandal. A wife would change that, hopefully.

If the intended wife would ever leave her room, that was.

There was a thud from a door upstairs, and more loud voices, followed by hurried footsteps.

Mrs. Seymour entered the room, looking flushed. She drew in a breath. “My sister is...” Her gaze trailed to the window by Dante’s head and Dante glanced over. A sheet dangled in front of the window.

“Oh no!” Maddie dashed out of the room and Dante followed.

Outside, Maddie peered up at the window from which the sheet dangled. Dante craned his neck and had to press his lips together to suppress a laugh. Dangling from the second window, suspended by the sheet was Miss Phoebe. She was struggling to grip the sheet and untangle her skirts from the windowsill of the second-floor window.

Mr. Bloomsbury popped his head out of the window above. “What are you doing, Phoebe?” he demanded.

Miss Phoebe peered down. “Will you not leave me alone for one moment?” She gripped her skirt and tried to wrench it free, but it had somehow become ensnared, perhaps on a nail or something.

Mrs. Seymour clapped her hands to her cheeks. “Phoebe, you shall kill yourself.”

He stepped closer to the scene of the drama. “She is not high enough to kill herself.” He took Mrs. Seymour’s arm, ignoring the instant bolt of heat touching her caused, and pulled her back. “But she might fall on you and do some damage.”

“Rather that than she die!”

“I shall go find a ladder,” Mr. Bloomsbury declared, vanishing back into the house.

“Miss Phoebe,” he called up to her, “if you wish to avoid me so badly, I would rather you walk out of the door.”

“I can hardly do that now!” she retorted, giving her skirt another yank.

Dante blew out a breath. This was not how he’d envisioned today going. He eyed the trellis that crawled up the wall. Presumably Miss Phoebe had thought to ascend it before getting caught. What the devil had his mother been thinking sending him to this side of the country and tangling him up with these women?

He put an experimental foot on the trellis and tested his weight on it. Tugging off his jacket, he passed it to Mrs. Seymour.

“Lord Southwick, you cannot mean to climb it!” she protested.

He eyed the lady dangling above him. “I do not see that we have any other choice.”

“Oh dear. Where on earth is Papa with that ladder?”

Hooking his fingers onto the trellis, he lifted himself from the ground and let himself relax a little when the wood took his weight. A wail emanated from above him when Miss Phoebe’s grip slipped a little and she ended up

angled, caught by her skirts and a weak grip on the windowsill above.

He climbed higher. If he did not untangle her soon, she'd lose her grip and he doubted her tangled skirts would prevent her from falling to the ground. She'd break a leg at the very least. He swallowed and took one more step.

"Oh, help," cried Miss Phoebe. "I'm losing—"

Her body angled suddenly as her grip failed. A ripping sound signaled the end of the trellis's hold on her skirts. Dante instinctively reached out, releasing his own grip on the wooden frame. A bundle of skirts and woman fell into his arms, knocking him to the ground and slamming the air out of his lungs. He could only release a grunt when the full weight of Miss Phoebe bounced from his body.

With a groan, he rolled over while Miss Phoebe gingerly stood. She clasped hands to her cheeks as Mrs. Seymour dropped to her knees beside him and prodded him with her fingers. He groaned again, but not from pain. Her touch had the oddest effect on him.

"Oh, Lord Southwick, are you injured?" She leaned over him. "Is something broken?"

He managed a smile. "My pride is perhaps. But it is not irreparable."

"This was all my fault," Miss Phoebe wailed.

"Yes, it is," Maddie snapped. "Whatever were you thinking?"

Tears welled in Miss Phoebe's eyes, and Dante shook his head. "Not to fear, there is no permanent damage," he assured her.

Mrs. Seymour turned her attention from her sister to him. "Oh, you are bleeding." She lifted the hem of his waistcoat where a few buttons had popped open. A little blood tinged the shirt.

"Only a scratch."

"We have a—" Mr. Bloomsbury paused in his tracks, a young lad carrying a ladder behind him. Mr. Bloomsbury eyed his daughter and her torn skirts then looked to Dante. Maddie quickly snatched her hands back from where she had been touching his stomach.

"I see you are down, Phoebe," her father said stiffly. "Perhaps you had better hasten to your room and change." He wagged a finger at her. "You will not be going anywhere for the rest of the day, and it seems you owe Lord Southwick an apology."

Miss Phoebe dropped her gaze to the ground. "Yes, Father." She gathered her torn skirts in one hand and moved past him, pausing to mutter a contrite apology.

“Phoebe,” her father reprimanded. “That was barely an apology.”

Dante pushed himself up from the ground and held up a hand. “Perhaps the apologies can wait until tomorrow.” He smiled. “When you can accompany me on a walk. I have yet to see much of Monmouthshire and I am sure you can show me the sights.”

Phoebe opened her mouth then shut it, nodding.

“An excellent idea,” her father declared. “Maddie, you can escort your sister.”

Mrs. Seymour’s gaze shot to Dante’s and he’d be damned if he did not get a thrill at the idea of spending more time with her. Which had not been his intention at all. After all, he had little interest in the local area, but it seemed a fine opportunity to expel a little charm on Miss Phoebe now that she was feeling guilty.

The parks in London were his preferred destination for walks with attractive ladies, and those walks usually worked wonderfully to sway a woman. What could be better than a little fresh air combined with some discrete touches and flattering words?

Of course, the major difference was he was not looking to seduce Miss Phoebe into the bedroom. At least as a temporary companion. God help him, he should never have let his mother talk him into this.

“Of course, Papa,” Mrs. Seymour said softly, drawing Dante’s attention back to her sweet mouth.

“There. It is decided,” Mr. Bloomsbury said rather too gleefully. “Now go and make yourself presentable, Phoebe. And I think Lord Southwick could do with some tending to.” He glanced at Dante. “You must forgive Phoebe, Lord Southwick. She is...well...that is...I am certain she will make a fine, obedient wife once married. She just needs a little more time to adjust to the idea.” He waved at his other daughter. “Take Lord Southwick to the kitchen, Maddie, and ensure he is in fine health.”

Dante was about to protest until she took his arm and led him into the house. He had yet to see the full damage, but he doubted it warranted any kind of nursing back to health. Denying care from Mrs. Seymour was near impossible, though.

She led him down the stairs and into the kitchen. Modest but well-equipped, no one occupied the room. Mrs. Seymour pulled out a chair and motioned for him to sit.

“Do your parents not keep servants?” he asked.

“The cook does not live in, and they have a maid and a kitchen boy. The house does not really warrant any more than that,” she explained as she retrieved a bowl and filled it with water. Her lips tilted. “No doubt you are used to the hustle and bustle of a busy household.”

“The London house has a household of twenty servants. Even the Bath house has ten.”

“I am afraid we are a modest family of modest means.” She put the bowl of water on the table beside him and laid out some clean cloths. “Not the sort of family to which a lord would pay attention.”

He hardly knew how to respond to this. Given their modest means, he supposed many would question why he was not pursuing a woman of greater wealth. He could tell her the truth, he supposed, and hope she believed him, but even those who knew him were quick to judge and find him guilty. The truth was, Mrs. Seymour seemed to view him as something other than a scandalous Musgrave and he rather liked it.

Now if only he could remember that this wasn't the woman he was supposed to be impressing.

“Your father is well-respected in many circles. And I hardly have need of many more servants,” he said with a grin.

“And here I thought all men wanted nothing more than endless amounts of servants,” she said with a smile. Dabbing a cloth in the water, she glanced down at his shirt. “Um, I think you will need to...” She made a lifting gesture.

“I am not like all men,” he said, easing up his shirt to reveal a thin cut tracing its way just under his ribs.

“I imagine all men like to think that,” she teased.

Mrs. Seymour looked down, her smile vanishing instantly, then lifted her gaze to his once more. He saw her throat work. She swung her gaze quickly away and knelt in front of him. He hissed at the first touch of her fingers on his skin. They were cool, yet they made his body feel as though it were aflame.

“Forgive me.”

Forgive her? Christ, there was nothing to forgive. If anything, it should be him apologizing. He was enjoying the sight of her on her knees in front of him far too much. Each time she shifted, he got a marvelous view of cleavage and the gentle touch of her fingers to his abdomen was a blissful mix of torture and absolute pleasure.

She dabbed gently, cleaning away the dried blood until the scratch was no

more than a thin red line. She dried the injury and stood. “Do you hurt anywhere else?”

“Christ, yes.” The words, gritty and strained, came out before he could prevent them.

“Oh.” She stepped backward.

“I mean, a few bruises. Nothing you can do.”

She nodded slowly, avoiding his gaze. Mrs. Seymour picked up the bowl and cloths and put them on the table before turning back to face him. Dante readjusted his shirt and did up his waistcoat then stood.

“Thank you for your diligent care, Mrs. Seymour. You make an excellent nurse.”

“I am sorry that you were injured.” She sighed. “I am sorry for my sister. This whole...ruination has taken its toll on her.”

He nodded. “I am sorry that she is in such a position too.”

She tilted her head. “And yet if she was not, she would not have to consider an arranged marriage.”

“I do not take pleasure in a woman having someone forced upon her.”

“Even a husband?”

He chuckled. “I am certain I am not so bad a prospect as the cad who put her in such a situation.”

She smiled. “Indeed, you are an excellent prospect, but you must understand, my lord, Phoebe is like my little sister.”

“You are twins.”

“I’m aware of that.” She gave him a slightly amused look. “But there is an hour between us.”

“So you are her older sister?” Dante could see that. He recognized the same care for her sister in Maddie as he saw in his oldest sister Vi, who wished to protect them all fiercely. “I have twins in my family too and that small time difference was forever argued over when Lilly and Ivy were younger.”

“I just want her well looked after.”

“Are you threatening me?” he asked with a grin and took a step closer to her and her eyes widened.

“Of course not. I am just...warning you. Explaining my concerns. Reminding you why she is reluctant. I am just...”

He took her hand. He shouldn’t have done, but it seemed he had little control of his own body while in her company. “I promise I shall not treat her

poorly.”

Mrs. Seymour eyed their joined hands and released an audible breath. “Good.” She met his gaze again. “I should...” She went to turn away, but he kept hold of her hand.

“Maddie...”

Her eyes widened further. He saw her take a breath. It was the first time he’d said her name to her.

“Yes?”

What could he say? He wanted to explain away that kiss. To tell her that he was not some cad who kissed women whenever he felt like that, but that would not be true would it?

He kissed women on a regular basis. He did not, however, kiss the sisters of women he intended to marry. He did not find himself swept up in an insane sort of passion that seemed to be eating into his gut. He certainly never found himself practically falling at a woman’s feet to spend a mere second longer with her.

“Never mind.”

There was no explaining away his behavior yesterday nor could he rationalize what was occurring now. Dante had no doubt she recognized it if her labored breaths and colored cheeks were anything to go by. He released her hand and straightened his waistcoat as he offered what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

“I shall speak with your sister tomorrow and try to offer some reassurances. Perhaps that will help.”

“Perhaps.” Her smile was uncertain.

About as uncertain as he was, no doubt. But he had no choice. He’d promised his mother he’d rescue this girl and no doubt she wanted the same for her sister.

As he watched her walk up the stairs, Dante couldn’t shake the feeling that he had made things worse. He promised his mother he would save Phoebe and, for once in his life, he wanted to do something right. But he couldn’t even protect Maddie from himself.

Touching his side and trying to ignore the sensation her fingers upon him had left, he vowed to himself that he wouldn’t bring scandal upon this family too. They were good people and didn’t deserve anything that had happened to them. He had to protect them, no matter what.

Chapter Eight

“Just be pleasant, that is all I ask,” Maddie pleaded as she tidied her sister’s hair.

Phoebe rolled her eyes in the mirror. “I will not be rude, I promise.

“And no more dramatic escapes?”

“Where exactly do you expect me to go in the middle of the countryside?” Phoebe leaned to look out of the window. “It is not the nicest of days. I hope we do not get rained on.”

Maddie eyed the cloudy skies. “I do not think it will rain.”

“I hope it does. I hope it snows. Then we shall be forced to cancel.”

“You sound like a petulant child,” Maddie admonished.

Her sister sighed. “I know. And I hate it. But I *feel* like a child. I feel like ever since that...that bastard touched me, all my choices were taken away.” She met Maddie’s gaze in the mirror. “Even you want me to marry this man and you always told me to marry for love.”

Love. The word made her heart do a little jolt against her ribcage. She frowned. Why should she think of love in relation to Lord Southwick? She hardly knew the man.

She knew how he smiled, though. How he laughed. She knew when he was teasing her. She knew how his lips felt upon hers. She certainly knew all too well what his firm abdomen looked like and how it was hard yet soft under her fingertips.

Even now, the memory of that illicit touch sent a thrill through her.

“Maddie?”

Maddie snapped her attention back to Phoebe. “Yes?”

“I was asking you what you thought of him.”

Maddie forced a smile. “He seems a good man. Handsome too. I think you could do far worse.”

“Even though I do not love him. Even though I have this sense...” Phoebe looked down.

“Sense of what?”

Her sister shrugged. “It does not matter.” She stood and straightened her skirts. “Let us do this thing. At least then Papa cannot complain that I did not give the man a chance.”

“I am sure once you get to know Lord Southwick, you shall change your mind.”

Maddie felt her smile begin to waver. Her cheeks hurt from all the falseness. A tiny selfish voice inside her wanted to turn into a scream. It wanted to shout at the unfairness of it all. First because a man who thought it was his right to steal a kiss had stolen all choice from her sister and second—and most of all—because Maddie wanted to be the one tweaking her hair and worrying about how she looked for Lord Southwick.

She swallowed and bent to neaten her curls in the mirror. They were as tidy as when they had first been done but she could not look at her sister, not at the moment. Admitting to herself that she was interested in her sister’s intended made her feel hot and shaky. Phoebe would know something was wrong if she looked too closely.

The doorbell rang and Maddie’s heart near leapt into her throat. Phoebe gripped Maddie’s arm.

“Well, let us get this over and done with.”

“And be nice,” Maddie reminded her.

By the time they made their way downstairs, their father and Lord Southwick were deep in conversation. Both men looked their way as Maddie and her sister stepped onto the tiled floor of the hallway. Lord Southwick’s gaze locked immediately onto Maddie’s and she felt him glance her over. There were people who had known her and her sister all their lives who still got them confused yet she was certain he knew exactly who he was looking at.

His eyes darkened. She had been around long enough to recognize such looks from men, but the way Lord Southwick looked at her had her nearly tripping over her sturdy boots.

Drawing in an unsteady breath, she smiled at Lord Southwick, and urged her sister forward.

He dipped his head in greeting. “I am looking forward to seeing the countryside.”

“You make it sound as though you have never set foot in the countryside, my lord.” Phoebe eyed him coldly.

He chuckled. "That is almost true. I prefer London and I have never had occasion to visit Monmouthshire before."

"We have some quite beautiful sights," Maddie assured him. "Not as exciting as London, I am sure, but they do take one's breath away."

His gaze set on hers again. "I know that feeling quite well," he murmured.

"Come on, let us hurry before the weather breaks on us." Phoebe finished buttoning her pelisse.

Phoebe kept her pace several steps in front of Dante and Maddie, forcing him to turn his attention to Maddie. "Where exactly is it we are headed?"

"The Kymin."

"The Kymin?"

Maddie smiled. "Kymin Hill is not far from us." She gestured ahead of her. "Hill is rather a misnomer. From where we are, it is a gentle slope though it looks over much of the valley," she explained. "A few years ago, a group of gentlemen endeavored to build a meeting house there which became known as the Kymin. You can get the best views of Monmouthshire there as well as gain much needed shelter from the weather when needed."

"I did not visit at the best time of year, it seems," he commented as a breeze riffled his clothes.

"Summer here is just wonderful. Is that not right, Phoebe?"

"Oh yes, it's lovely," she agreed, some way ahead of them now. She led the way deeper into the forest until they emerged from the trees on a large expanse of land at the top of a hill.

"I do quite like it when it is like this, though," Maddie confessed. "There's something a little exciting about the wind whipping across the top of this hill." She gestured to a monument tucked next to the trees. "The men who built the Kymin also erected this in memory of naval men lost at sea." Then she motioned to the tall white building at the very top of the hill. "And this is the Kymin."

The building was a high tower, painted white so that it stood out starkly against the countryside. Windows were set into the building but there was little else to be said about it.

"I see."

Maddie chuckled. "We are quite proud of it, you know. It is my favorite place to come."

She marched onward until they caught up with Phoebe by the building. Phoebe spared them a glance over her shoulder and moved around the wall

toward the viewing area. A door in the front of the building was open, revealing benches lining the circular walls.

“I can see that it must be quite peaceful to come up here.”

Maddie could not help but smile up at him. She knew the building wasn't as remarkable as any of the great palaces or cathedrals around the country yet there was something about the peace and solitude it offered her that never failed to draw her here. “Yes, that's exactly why I come here. It is the perfect place to escape. To feel small.”

He peered at her. “To feel small?”

Now why did she add that? No one understood her desire to feel such things. Most people longed to be at the center of attention or at the very least to feel as though their life meant something. She only ever wanted to feed the very depths of her soul, to simply exist and take enjoyment in what the world had to offer would be enough for her.

“It's hard to explain.”

“I'd like to understand.”

“I just sometimes want to feel as though my every decision does not matter. That silly mistakes do not have devastating consequences.”

He gave a small smile. “I understand completely but what silly mistakes could you have possibly made?”

She looked toward Phoebe, the wind clipping her bonnet and tousling her ribbons. Then she glanced back at Lord Southwick. Was he implying their kiss was no mistake or simply that he had forgotten it entirely?

If only she could do the same.

“There is quite the view here too,” she said hastily as her throat tightened while she looked at him. Maddie gestured toward her sister and marched toward the metal railing that lined the hill.

He leaned against the railing and looked out over the valley. A few farmhouses were nestled against the hills but there was little else to be seen. It was a stark contrast to London and Maddie wasn't certain he would appreciate it like she did.

“Oh, look,” declared Phoebe suddenly. “There is Miss Harriet and her sister. I promised Harriet I would...” She frowned. “Um, talk to her about something. Do excuse me, I really ought to go and...yes...” Phoebe dashed off to catch up with the two women who were making their way down the other side of the hill.

Maddie groaned aloud and she heard Lord Southwick muffle a laugh at her

feeble excuses.

“Forgive her, please,” she begged. “She is not normally so rude.”

“These are...different circumstances. I am sure I can allow her a little time to adjust to the idea of...”

Marrying you. For some reason, she was glad he didn’t say it aloud.

“Perhaps we should head home,” she suggested.

He nodded toward the Kymin. “You said this is your favorite place to be. It would be a shame to waste our walk here. Why do we not sit for a while?”

Of course, she could say no. It made sense that they should return while the weather remained dry, and the only reason to come here had been to help Lord Southwick and Phoebe spend time together.

“That would be nice,” she found herself saying instead.

They stepped inside the building, and Maddie sat on the wooden bench. He followed suit. From where they were, the building protected them from the wind that blew across the hill, while the view across the fields was spectacular. She couldn’t help but stare at his side profile as he peered at the view.

“I think if I ever owned a hill, I would build something like this myself.”

“My late husband always said it was a waste of time, but I like it.”

He looked her way. “Your father said he died young. I am sorry.”

Maddie nodded. “Too young. We were not married for long.”

“It must have been devastating.”

“It was a shock,” she said faintly. Admitting she never loved Colin to anyone other than her sister seemed traitorous. She didn’t enjoy being married to a man who thought so little of her, but she never wished death upon him either.

“You are close to your family it seems.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Even when I married, we remained close by. I own a small house in the village, but Mama tends to be sickly, so I help Papa and Phoebe whenever I can.”

“It must be pleasant being able to spend so much time with them.”

“Pleasant, but a little stifling at times,” she admitted. “Are you close to your family?”

“My mother and I are close, though she spends much of her time in Bath. I was close to my four sisters growing up, however, I travelled a lot in previous years, so it is only since I returned that I have had the opportunity to get to know them properly as grown women.”

“A brother with four sisters. What a worry that must be for you.”

“Not at all. They are the clever, independent sort and fiercely loyal to one another. I think I caused them more worry than they ever caused me.”

Her breath caught. She’d only ever heard men decry having women in their family. What a hassle they were. What a stress. Even her father, who loved her and her sister dearly, worried over there being no men in the family.

She opened her mouth to say as much but something on the wall behind her caught his eye. “Do not move, Mrs. Seymour. I do believe there is a spider behind you.”

She stilled and flicked a look over her shoulder.

“Do not fear, I shall get it for you.” He stood and moved to squash it with his glove, but Maddie rose and moved her hand in front of his glove.

“Oh do not squash it. It’s not doing any harm.” She scooped it up in both hands and took it outside to set it free. Lord Southwick followed her out.

“Most ladies I know are terrified of spiders.”

“Phoebe is, which is why I became rather immune to them. I always had to rescue her from them.” She straightened and smiled, brushing a curl from her eye.

“It seems to me you play the role of your sister’s rescuer quite often.”

She blinked a few times. How could this man who scarcely knew her so deeply practically see inside her soul? But of course she would not be trying to rescue her sister had she not put her Phoebe in such a situation thanks to her own naïvety when it came to Mr. Woodward, and she wasn’t certain she was willing to admit that to Lord Southwick.

“Perhaps that explains your desire to escape at times.”

Her breath caught in her throat, and she stared at the path leading down the hill, knowing she would have to force herself to return swiftly. Being around this man who had far too much insight into her mind for a practical stranger was far too dangerous and if she wasn’t careful, she might well make another mistake and ruin Phoebe’s future further.

Chapter Nine

Something about being with Maddie settled a peace over Dante's soul.

As soon as the thought entered his mind, he stilled and gave himself a mental shake. He'd never been one for poetic thoughts. Poetic words perhaps so long as they were directed at a woman.

He wasn't sure that counted as poetic anyway, but it certainly was unusual for him. He couldn't place his finger on what was happening. All he knew was being with her did something to his mind, as though it was a puzzle being pieced back together. For much of his adult life, he darted from place to place, avoided staying anywhere too long lest his reputation catch up to him.

Here, now, for the first time ever, he wanted to linger.

He stole a glance sideways at Maddie, watching the wind sift through her curls and pinken her cheeks. He truly had never seen a woman so beautiful. Something about the way her lips curved, and her eyes brightened as she looked toward the landscape she had probably known all her life made his heart beat oddly.

"We should catch up with Phoebe."

Phoebe, yes. The woman he was here for.

The woman who looked almost exactly the same as Maddie. Same hair color, same profile, same curving lips. It would be easy, surely, for him to transfer any attraction he had toward Maddie to Phoebe.

Yet he struggled to drag his attention toward her sister who was apparently making quite the effort to escape them as she marched her two friends distinctly away from the hill.

"With haste, it seems," Maddie said with a sigh.

Dante almost wanted to laugh at the ridiculousness of it all. The woman he was meant to marry was running away from him whilst he couldn't cease thinking of her sister.

He followed Maddie down the hill as Phoebe and her friends made their

way along the lane on the other side toward a large cluster of buildings.

“I really am sorry about my sister, Lord Southwick.”

“You have no need to apologize for your sister, Maddie. This cannot be easy on her.”

Her eyes widened at the use of her name, but she let it go. “She’s always been a bit more...unruly than me.” She bit down on her bottom lip. “That is—not to say she would not be a good wife—”

“You do not need to try to persuade me of that,” he insisted. “We both know this is to be a marriage of convenience.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I wish there was a better way. I feel responsible —”

“Responsible? For the actions of a man with no honor whatsoever?”

A flash of anger rolled through him, making his pulse kick up briefly. It was bad enough whoever this blackguard was had left a woman ruined, but to think Maddie blamed herself for what he had done made him want to hunt down the man and ensure he paid for his actions.

“He mistook Phoebe for me you see,” she confessed quietly as she paused to push open the wooden gate between the bottom of the hill and the lane.

He put his hand to the gate, his dark gloves close to her pale blue ones, and held her gaze firmly.

“Whatever that man’s intentions—and I am loath to call him a man—you could not have fathomed them—”

“If I had not been so naïve, if I had but understood—” She gave a dry laugh and looked to the sky. “All I wanted was a book.”

Dante didn’t quite know what a book had to do with anything. He just knew men like that were willing to do anything to get what they wanted and so long as women paid the price for their behavior, he would never change.

“I would call him out if I could.”

“Oh no.” Maddie shook her head vigorously, making the ribbons of her bonnet curl about her neck. “I’m almost glad he fled when he realized the mistake he had made. Father is a terrible shot and even if he survived, he would never endure going to prison for illegal dueling.”

“If he ever returns, I will be sorely tempted, I must admit.”

He shouldn’t even be talking on such matters considering there was apparently a father out there wanting to do the same to him, and there would be many people willing to risk prison for a hefty sum. Despite what the law said, duels still occurred and were rarely prosecuted or even reported.

The fact that these women were left to suffer with no one to protect them rankled him, though. Where were the demands for justice that he had heard rippling through the *ton* when he had supposedly harmed two women? Where were the gossip columnists chasing down a man guilty of great harm? Maddie and her sister deserved better.

Better than him too, he supposed. He could hardly admit to his storied history, and he hoped Mr. Bloomsbury was right and the rumors circulating about him never reached Monmouthshire. He wasn't certain he could stand Maddie talking about him the way she spoke of this Mr. Woodward bastard.

Several heartbeats passed. Maddie's gaze remained locked onto his. He fought the temptation to fold his fingers over hers.

He shouldn't be thinking of Maddie like this, shouldn't be allowing himself to be distracted when there was so much at stake. This marriage was his chance at redemption, his chance to prove to society that he was no longer the scoundrel they all believed him to be. He couldn't afford to mess this up.

But as he looked into her eyes, he felt himself losing control. It was as if the world had fallen away and all that mattered was her. Her husky voice, her delicate features, the way she held herself with such poise.

He couldn't ever recall feeling this almost sickening sensation before, so deep and powerful that he had a hard time refuting it.

"I won't let anything else happen to you or your sister," he said, his voice gritty.

Perhaps if he made such a promise aloud, he'd keep it.

"I know, my lord." Maddie offered a slim smile and removed her hand from the gate.

He paused. "Call me Dante. Please."

After a moment's hesitation, she nodded. They walked in silence, the only sounds coming from the crunching of leaves and twigs beneath their feet. Dante's mind leapt about, trying to come to a conclusion about his feelings for Maddie. He knew he shouldn't be thinking such thoughts, but he couldn't help it. She was all he could think about since he arrived in Monmouthshire.

They reached a cluster of cottages and stone houses. There were shops and a tavern all facing in on a large stone cross worn by time and weather.

But no Phoebe.

"She's probably gone into the village store." Maddie muttered something under her breath about her sister being immature then motioned toward a building with curved windows and a wrought iron sign that creaked in the

wind.

The thatched roof hung low over the entrance, the thatch a dull brown from recent rain.

Dante wasn't certain he felt any more sensible than Phoebe at present so didn't comment.

He followed Maddie inside to be greeted by the scent of pine needles. Draped across each window and all along the low wooden beams were elaborate garlands of evergreen leaves and branches entwined with dried berries. Dante had almost forgotten his Christmas deadline until seeing the elaborately decorated shop.

He'd been too occupied with Maddie.

"If you're looking for your sister," a man in a pristine apron said, "she went over to the drapers with Miss Harriet."

"Thank you, Mr. Keene," Maddie replied brightly.

"Should be kept under lock and key," the shopkeeper muttered as they ducked back out of the building.

Dante pivoted on his heel, but Maddie grabbed his arm. "We've heard worse."

He gritted his teeth. "You and Phoebe deserve better."

The fury roaring through him quickly abated when he registered the feel of her fingers about his arm. He glanced at where her hand curled about his coat just as she swiftly dropped her hand to her side.

"We should..." Her words trailed off as he frowned and peered around her.

He grabbed her by both shoulders and pivoted as a rider bore down upon them, horse hooves hammering the packed earth.

Maddie let out a yelp as they barely managed to jump out of the way in time. The rider didn't even seem to notice them as he flew past, his mount kicking up dirt and stones in its wake.

Dante cursed under his breath as he steadied Maddie. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head, her eyes wide. "No, I'm fine. Thank you."

"Not fine," he muttered. A stone must have struck her, leaving a fine cut upon her cheek. He retrieved his handkerchief and dabbed it away. "Bloody fool could have killed someone."

His blood chilled as the words left his mouth. Namely him. He already knew a price was on his head. Had he been found already? Had someone decided running him down in the road was better than risking it all in a duel?

Maddie's hand flew up to her cheek, wincing at the touch. "It's nothing,"

she said, trying to reassure Dante. “Just a scratch.”

One scratch too many. The rider had come far too close to running down Maddie. It could have been a coincidence, but he doubted it. He looked around, trying to spot the rider but he was already gone, leaving nothing but a trail of dust and uncertainty.

She dabbed her cheek and handed him back the handkerchief. He scrunched it tight in his fist.

“Did you recognize him?” Dante asked.

“I barely saw him.”

“Me neither.”

“Thank goodness, you reacted so quickly, though.”

He nodded, jaw tight. It was one thing to hear rumors of threats, but quite another to have them on his doorstep.

“Are you certain you are well?”

She gave him a firm look. “I am no wilting flower.”

“No.” He blinked a few times. “No, of course you’re not.”

Dante couldn’t even justify the protective surge raging through him at present. Maddie was hardly a fool and had lived a full life before meeting him. No matter what she said about being naïve, anyone could see she could take care of herself.

“We should find Phoebe right away.” Dante scanned the surrounding area for any sign of danger. He was in unfamiliar territory, and he didn’t know who he could trust.

“Right away,” she agreed.

They made their way to the draper’s shop, finding Phoebe and her friend Harriet perusing bolts of fabric. Phoebe’s expression faltered at the sight of her sister.

“What happened?”

Dante cleared his throat, his pulse still racing from the near miss. “We had a bit of a scare on the way here. A rider nearly ran us down.”

Phoebe’s eyes widened, and she clutched her sister’s arm. “Are you both okay?”

“We’re fine,” Maddie assured her. “Just a scratch.”

Phoebe pursed her lips. “I bet it was John Gardener. He’s a horribly reckless rider.”

“Probably,” Maddie said, casting a glance Dante’s way.

He forced his expression into a bland smile. There was no sense in

worrying the sisters or doing anything rash. Though he could not deny he'd made enemies in his life, and not always by accident, he had always thought he could handle them. Now, with Maddie and Phoebe in the mix, he couldn't afford to take any chances. He needed to find out who had put a price on his head and put an end to this farce. Quickly.

Chapter Ten

“What the devil are you doing here, Mother?” Dante stood as she entered the drawing room of the manor house.

Dressed for the chilly weather, her thick fur-trimmed pelisse hugged her shoulders and swamped her delicate frame. Flickers of pale hair revealed themselves underneath an oversized hat.

“I’ve decided to take a little break from Bath.” She took a tour of the room, running her fingers over a gilded mantle clock.

He lifted a brow. “You braved the roads here to take a little break? Do you not need to be in Bath to prepare for Christmas? I thought all my sisters were joining you there.”

She fixed him with a look that once upon a time would have had him running away as fast as his young legs could carry him. He was no longer eight years old, however. He eyed her back.

“I wanted to be certain that this match goes ahead,” she replied airily, finally settling onto the high-backed sofa that faced the fire. “You appear to be looking after the place,” she remarked.

He grunted. How his mother managed to make him feel like an eight-year-old all over again then remark on his cleanliness, he did not know. Dante took a moment to inhale a long breath before coming to stand in front of her.

“Were you going somewhere?”

“Just into the village.” He wasn’t going to explain he wanted to find out if anyone knew anything about who had tried to run him and Maddie down. The last thing he needed was her fretting over him.

She flicked her gaze up and down him before her lips curved and her eyes warmed. “The country air is doing you some good, darling. Being away from all that temptation has probably been good for you too.”

Temptation. Christ, little did she know that temptation was greater than ever here. But it was not all around him, like in London. It had one source, and her name was Maddie. Deep in his gut, a certainty settled, and it told him

something strange and frankly terrifying.

It told him that even if there was temptation around in other forms, he would only have eyes for Maddie.

This was becoming a damned mess.

“Will you not sit?” His mother patted the red velvet seat next to her.

He shook his head. “I have spent all morning sitting.”

“You left your bed before twelve o’clock?” She arched an eyebrow. “How astonishing.”

“I did not realize you had come all the way to Monmouthshire to insult me, Mother,” he said dryly.

She chuckled and straightened. “It is up to a mother to ensure her son’s feet stay on the ground.” Her expression mellowed, and she sighed. “I failed at that I fear.”

Dante shook his head to himself. He was not falling for her dramatics. The older she grew, the more she relished these performances and most of the time he didn’t mind indulging her. She always meant well.

“I do not believe for one second you think you failed as a mother.”

She narrowed her gaze at him. “Well, then why are you not wed yet? Clearly I failed if you cannot persuade that dear sweet Miss Phoebe to wed you. You’re meant to be a catch, Basil.”

Fighting a shudder at the utterance of a name he’d loathed since he was a boy, he turned away to eye the painting over the fireplace—a dark scenery of a storm rolling over the hills of what he assumed must be Monmouthshire. The ominous setting rather replicated how he felt right now—as though dark and dangerous weather was sweeping in over his life and whipping it into a frenzy. He looked back at his mother.

He gritted his teeth. He’d spent the better part of three days practically chasing Phoebe whilst trying to distract himself from her sister. “I’m trying my hardest.”

“There is talk of further scandal in Town, you know.”

Damn it. He’d rather hoped his mother had remained in ignorance. But if his sisters knew of the trouble he’d accidentally found himself in, he wasn’t surprised his mother did. “Does Father know?”

“I never lie to your father, dear.”

“You need not worry. It’s simply brash talk. Nothing shall come of it.”

“Soon, I shall have all the fathers in town at my doorstep demanding satisfaction.” His mother gave a hefty sigh and glanced around the room

before her gaze landed upon the bell sitting on a small table. She moved swiftly and gave it a determined ring before sitting down again. "I need tea," she explained as though it would somehow fix this entire mess.

Dante rather thought he needed something stronger.

"You have had your moments," she continued. "Been a little wild. But I know full well I raised you better than that. You always so adored your sisters, always wanting to spend time with them. I suppose I should have known it would come to this."

Shaking his head, he peered at her. "Mother, I have little idea what you mean."

"You accepted the first of those rumors to protect someone—someone who reminded you of your sisters perhaps?"

"There was little use in denying them. I'm a Musgrave after all."

"As are we all. Even now your sisters are wed, the *ton* will never let us forget that. And who are we to care? We are all happy and loved." She pursed her lips. "Apart from you, Basil."

"I'm happy and, last I heard, you still love me, Mother."

"And I always will. But I won't be around forever."

"You're hardly bloody well ancient."

"Basil, no cursing."

He pressed his lips together. Despite her rather free-spirited nature, the one thing the Countess of Porchester did not tolerate was cursing. The lesson had never stuck too well with him, unfortunately.

The maid brought a tray of tea into the room, saving him from apologizing. Even after the tea was poured, Dante remained standing. He wanted the option of making a quick escape if necessary. His mother had already set him up with Phoebe. What else could she possibly want?

"I called in on Miss Phoebe's family on the way here. Such lovely people."

"You called on them?" He tried not to choke on the words. The last thing he needed at present was the woman who knew him best poking around this marriage business.

"Indeed. And they shall be calling on us shortly." She stood and stepped forward to straighten his waistcoat.

He peered down at his mother who was a good head and a half shorter than he, and marveled at the damned woman. How she always managed to breeze into a situation and manipulate it to her satisfaction he did not know.

"I am quite capable of issuing invitations, you know," he grumbled.

“And yet, here you are, enjoying your leisure time, when your intended is still not your fiancée. I did not take my son for a coward.”

Nor did he. But he was. He'd been reluctant to see Phoebe again. Because if he saw Phoebe, he'd inevitably see Maddie. He needed some time away from her. Some time to somehow conquer this madness. He'd already been marked as the most dishonorable man in Society. He'd be damned if he'd go about seducing the wrong sister, and Maddie would not have it either.

“It is complicated.”

And dangerous, maybe. But he wasn't going to tell her about the near miss with the horse.

She shook her head. “You young people. Marriage is easy. It is the relationship afterwards that takes the work. Miss Phoebe has no reason to deny you.”

“Try telling her that.”

“Have you actually asked her?” she demanded.

“Phoebe has little interest in an arranged match. The chances are, she would turn me down flat.”

“Clearly you have not been trying hard enough. She is compromised after all. It should not take too much persuasion.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he blew out a breath. “I am here am I not? Doing as you bid?” He shook his head. “I never took you for a traditional mother of the *ton*.”

His mother affected an offended look. “I most certainly am not. However, my son is in trouble. Can you blame me for being concerned? Were your father not making Christmas preparations, he would be here too.”

“I do not need either of you to fret for me,” he assured her. “I'm going to make this right—for the both of us.”

“Well, with any luck you shall have a charming wife on your arm by Christmas, the gossip shall all be forgotten and all this talk of duels and whatnot will be silenced by the time you return to Town.”

“That is the hope, yes,” he said tightly.

Though, he was beginning to wonder if he might not care for returning at all. There was something somewhat appealing about the lush Monmouthshire hills...or was it a certain woman who added the appeal?

The chime of the front doorbell echoed through the house and his mother's face brightened. “Oh, they are here already.” She plucked open the buttons of her pelisse and flung it off her shoulders before thrusting it at a footman who

suffered a face full of fabric before gathering himself and taking it away. “I wish I had taken the time to freshen up.”

“You look quite well, Mother.” He grinned. “Hardly any paint splotches at all.”

She gave him a scolding tap on the arm and straightened her pristine gown.

The door to the drawing room opened and a footman announced the arrival of Phoebe and Maddie. He tried his best, but he could not avoid meeting Maddie’s gaze. His heart rose into his throat, and he could feel the hairs on the back of his neck prick.

Did she have to look so bloody beautiful? Dressed in a simple, light purple day dress and matching coat, his eye was drawn to the column of her throat then down to where the dress cupped her breasts and cinched in underneath them. In truth, he had seen many, many more tempting outfits. He could not count the number of women who had seduced or attempted to seduce him in frothy, lacey concoctions designed to entice a man, but none could match up to Maddie in this gown.

He forced his attention to Phoebe, who eyed him warily. Any man with eyes in his head would conclude she was just as beautiful so why did his attention refuse to linger there?

“It is a pleasure to see you again, Miss Phoebe, Mrs. Seymour. You’ve already seen my mother once today it seems.”

Both women dipped, and Maddie nodded. “Lady Southwick was kind enough to call upon us this morning.”

“Was your father not able to accompany you?” His mother asked. “He’s such a charming man.”

“He shall be flattered to hear that, my lady,” said Maddie with a smile. “Unfortunately, he has some business to attend to, though he is grieved he cannot join us.”

“We just rang for tea. Do come and join us,” his mother demanded. “No doubt these young ladies are parched.”

“Oh, I just had tea—” Phoebe started but Maddie gave her a jab to the ribs with an elbow and she clamped her mouth shut.

Dante could not help but grin at the sisterly interaction. It was funny to see Phoebe so formal too. It seemed he should have had his mother accompany him all along. Then perhaps she’d have been less prone to climbing out of windows or running off with friends.

“Please do sit.” He motioned to the sofa on which his mother had

previously been seated.

His mother followed suit once they were seated and despite feeling the need to pace the room due to the stifling atmosphere of this blasted gathering, he forced himself into the armchair to Maddie's right. Within touching distance. He eyed her gloved hand. All he would need to do is reach out...

He snapped his attention away when his mother called his name. At least she didn't call him Basil, he supposed.

"Pardon?"

"I was just saying that Miss Phoebe has that wonderful glow that only seems to come with living in the country, do you not think?"

Trying not to visibly wince at his mother's obviousness, he nodded. "Indeed, she does."

Silence hung over the room for several ticks of the clock until it was interrupted by the clatter of a tray and tea and biscuits were brought in.

"Shall I serve?" Maddie offered hastily.

His mother nodded, and Maddie served with efficiency while Dante tried to ignore how her fingers curled around the delicate cup. A shiver tracked up his spine when he recalled how those fingers had felt on his bare abdomen. He met her gaze briefly and she fumbled the cup with a little cry.

Darting forward, he snatched it before the hot liquid could spill over her.

"Oh goodness, forgive me." Maddie's cheeks reddened as he handed her back the cup.

"What luck Dante has such quick reactions." His mother eyed Dante with curiosity.

If he didn't know better, he'd swear his mother had spotted the look they had exchanged. Yet how could she know anything? Nothing happened. It was a mere shared look after all.

"It is quite a fine day for this time of year. Not even that cold," his mother commented. "Perhaps we might take a walk in the gardens after this. The maze in the garden is rather fun."

Dante nodded. "I think that would be a fine idea." He had hardly glanced at the garden since his arrival at the house, but it seemed a better idea than sitting in close confines and suffering stilted conversation.

After donning their coats and gloves once more, Dante led them out into the garden, and he motioned to the path that wound around the house. "Follow me, ladies. The maze is just around here."

His mother latched onto Phoebe with an apologetic smile. "Forgive me,

dear. Do you mind holding my arm? I am a little unsteady on my feet.”

Dante snorted. Maddie swung a glance at him. “What is it?”

“My mother is as healthy as an ox. She likely wants a chance to interrogate your sister.”

“Oh, poor Phoebe.” Maddie swung a worried look behind her.

“Not to fear. She will not want to scare her away,” he assured her. “Here’s the maze.” He gestured to the tall hedge spanning half the width of the lawns. An arch had been cut into it. “It’s a relatively new addition. I don’t know the way out.”

Phoebe shrugged. “I have an excellent sense of direction.”

“I do not, I’m afraid,” Maddie said with a rueful smile.

“Well, you can guide me around Miss Phoebe.” His mother clung tightly to Phoebe. “I am rather like Mrs. Seymour I am afraid. I cannot tell my left from my right.”

That was a lie too. Dante somehow managed to keep his next snort at bay.

“Why do you not take Mrs. Seymour with you, and we shall see who can find their way out first?” challenged his mother.

He rolled his eyes. “Could she get any more obvious?” he murmured to Maddie. “She wants to talk Phoebe into marrying me.”

“I am sure Phoebe shall be able to hold her own,” Maddie replied, though he heard the uncertainty in her voice. “But it would not hurt the situation if your mother is able to persuade her of the benefits of this match.”

“Very well, let us begin.” He led Maddie into the maze, leaving his mother and Phoebe alone. “I find it is best not to interfere in my mother’s plans.”

Maddie smiled. “I am sure my mother would agree.”

Though he doubted his mother counted on how much he liked being alone with Maddie. Especially when she smiled at him. It tangled up his insides tighter than the maze until he was certain only Maddie could find the end and rescue him. Every time he looked at her, his breaths felt hot and his skin itchy. Even now his fingers tingled with the desire to be free to touch her.

“This way, I think,” he heard his mother say from behind a hedge.

“So much for her not knowing her left from right,” he grumbled, and took Maddie’s hand without thinking. “Come on.”

He led her deeper into the maze, pulling her along at a pace until she tugged back on his hand, giggling. “Slow down. I am certain your mother will not be running through the maze.”

The sudden stop sent him reeling into her. Their bodies met. He forgot to

breathe. He heard her take in a shuddery breath and the world narrowed down to a pinpoint that existed only of Maddie.

He loosened his hold on her hand, thinking to create some space between them but it didn't seem to work like that. His hand found her face, then his other followed suit, thrusting underneath her bonnet and holding her captive while he brought his mouth down upon hers. He caught a glimpse of the helplessness mingled with desire in her gaze before his lips met hers.

She stumbled back under the force of his kiss, the hedges offering support that let Dante press up against her body and feel every curve and inflection of her body as she responded to his firm kiss. Maddie opened her mouth to him with a gasp and wound her hands up and around his shoulders.

"Maddie," he murmured briefly before taking everything she offered.

He tangled his tongue with hers, drinking in the taste of sugar and heat. Maintaining his grip on her hair, he tore his mouth from hers and traced his lips down the arch of her neck, pressing heated, open-mouthed kisses to her flesh. A groan rumbled up from inside him. She weaved her hands through his hair, and it was only then he noticed his hat was gone.

He continued his kisses down, spreading them across her chest when she offered herself up to him. Then he let his hand curve around her body and gripped her rear through a dress that was surely too thin for winter.

"Oh look, there's the exit!" cried Phoebe.

Dante ripped away from Maddie and swung his gaze around. Wherever Phoebe and his mother were, they were not near enough to see anything. He swiped a hand across his face and eyed Maddie, who remained resting against the hedge, her chest rising and falling heavily, her bonnet at an angle, and her lips rosy and swollen. God, what madness was this that had befallen them?

Chapter Eleven

“They should cancel services when it’s this cold,” Phoebe whispered in Maddie’s ear.

Maddie didn’t respond, nor did she agree with her sister. They’d been coming to St. Lawrence church since they were babies, they’d been christened here. Goodness, she’d even been married here. Despite the chill sweeping through the ancient stone church and touching every surface it met, a sense of warmth always washed over her when she set foot in the building.

Even now, when all eyes were upon them, the squeak and groan of old hinges, the creak of the rafters, and the sigh of the wind through cracks and crevices soothed her and made her forget about pointed looks and whispered words.

Perhaps if she prayed hard enough, she might also forget Dante kissing her.

She closed her eyes, her hymn book clutched tightly between gloved hands.

Maddie took in a deep breath, letting the familiar scent of burning candles and old wood fill her lungs. She attempted to focus on the hymn, her voice a mere whisper as she struggled to swallow the lump that had formed in her throat. Her mind, however, kept drifting back to Dante. She could still feel the heat emanating from his body, his lips on hers, sending tremors through her body.

It was wrong on so many levels, she knew that. Dante was intended for her sister, and she should never have let it go that far. But she couldn’t help the way she felt around him, drawn to him as though he could somehow save her from himself. It only made things worse yet there was a comfort in knowing he shared in this madness.

As the hymn came to an end, Maddie finally opened her eyes, meeting the gaze of the vicar at the altar. He looked solemn, his eyes almost piercing as they swept over the congregants. Maddie felt a shiver run down her spine,

almost as if he knew her secret, as if he knew the depth of her sin. She quickly looked away, feeling the heat rise to her cheeks.

The vicar spoke, his voice echoing through the old church. Maddie tried to focus on his words, tried to listen to the sermon, but her mind kept drifting back to Dante. She couldn't shake him off, no matter how hard she tried. No one had snared her attention since Colin died. So why now? And why him? She scarcely knew the man.

It was no good. She'd have to be stronger. She'd always been good at that. Living in an unhappy marriage, coping with Colin's sudden death, and a huge change in the direction of her future hadn't been easy, so if she could endure that and come out intact, she could survive this ridiculous attraction.

Phoebe touched her arm, and Maddie swung a glance sideways to see her sister looking at her with concern.

"Are you well?" she mouthed.

Maddie nodded, forcing a smile. She'd have to be more cautious. If anyone was likely to see Maddie's turmoil, it was Phoebe. They were identical twins after all. But she couldn't tell her the truth. Not now, not ever. There was no chance Phoebe would accept Dante if she knew what had happened.

The rest of the service passed in a blur, Maddie barely registering the hymns and prayers. All she could think about was Dante, and the deep, pervasive ache that settled low in her belly.

Of all people to desire, why him?

At least he wasn't in attendance, she supposed, or else she'd really have trouble concentrating on the service.

Remaining close together as they exited the church, they managed to ignore some of the steely looks their family received. The vicar engaged their father in conversation and Maddie eased out a breath. The vicar was a kindly man and not inclined to fall into the trap of gossip and condemnation. Their father would appreciate the man reaching out and setting an example to the congregation.

Phoebe's hand wrapped tightly around her arm, almost pinching through the thick fabric and she was hauled close.

"Phoebe!"

Maddie stumbled a few steps to the side and collided with her sister.

"Look," her sister hissed. "It's him."

She steadied herself and followed Phoebe's gaze. Her heart froze more solidly than the ground underfoot.

“Mr. Woodward.”

Coming out of the church with a pretty young woman on his arm, he breezed past her father who had thankfully not noticed him.

“He must have arrived sometime before us.” Phoebe’s voice vibrated with anger. “If I’d have noticed him, I might well have leapt on him and wrung his neck.”

Maddie couldn’t help but picture doing similar. However, leaping upon the man and pounding him with her fists would not help their situation. The fact was, Mr. Woodward had slipped away from his indiscretion unharmed and unsullied, whilst Phoebe had not. If either of them turned upon him, it would only make things worse in the eyes of everyone who knew them.

She met his gaze, wishing she could let him know in one glance how much she loathed him.

How he even had the gall to come here, she did not know.

She knew one thing—despite everything that happened between her and Dante, Mr. Woodward was half the man he was. Dante would never run off and leave someone ruined. And he would do the right thing by Phoebe. She was certain of it.

He gave her a sheepish look then murmured something to his redheaded companion. Maddie had never seen her before, and she prayed the poor woman was not another victim of Mr. Woodward’s atrocious behavior.

The young lady eased her arm from Mr. Woodward’s and headed over.

“Oh Lord,” Phoebe muttered. “What now?”

Maddie couldn’t move. Was this Mr. Woodward’s wife perhaps? His fiancée? They knew so little of the man it was a possibility. She shifted slightly in front of her sister and swallowed hard.

The woman smiled broadly. Delicate in features with copper hair and eyes a pale green shade, she didn’t appear threatening. Maddie didn’t relax yet, though.

“Forgive me for being so bold as I know we have yet to be introduced but I was awfully keen to meet the both of you.”

Maddie shared a look with Phoebe.

“Um,” was all Phoebe managed.

“Uh,” added Maddie.

“I’m Miss Sophie Woodward,” she said sweetly. “Which of you is Miss Phoebe and who is Mrs. Seymour?”

Maddie closed her eyes. Oh Lord. His wife.

“I’m Phoebe,” said Maddie’s sister tightly.

“You know my brother of course.”

Maddie snapped her eyes open. “Your brother?”

“I was unable to join him here for Christmas, so he decided to come and fetch me. Isn’t he a darling?”

“I could think of a few other words to describe him,” Phoebe said through gritted teeth.

Miss Sophie’s smile wavered. “I am aware that when he left, the situation was not...ideal.”

Phoebe’s cheeks were a deep, mottled shade of pink. “That is one way of putting it.”

Maddie put a hand to her sister’s arm. This young lady was not to blame for her brother’s behavior anymore than Phoebe was.

“I’m sorry,” Maddie said, her voice softening. “It’s just been a trying time for our family.”

“I understand,” Miss Sophie said with a careful smile. “My brother has caused us all some heartache, but you must understand, his behavior was borne of utter admiration for you, Mrs. Seymour.”

Phoebe folded her arms. “He doesn’t even know which one of us is which. If he admired her so much, why did he mistake me for Maddie?”

Maddie peered around Miss Sophie to spy Mr. Woodward lingering by the gate to the graveyard. He twirled his cane awkwardly and flicked his gaze her way. He swiftly looked away.

There had never been any inkling of interest from him, so much so that Maddie had no compunctions about requesting Phoebe meet him alone to receive the rare book he’d promised her. How much admiration could he really have for her?

“He wishes to speak to you both, to make amends.”

Maddie turned her attention back to his softly spoken sister.

Phoebe snorted. “I would not speak to him if he was the last man on earth, and I do not think there are any amends to be made. I’m certainly not marrying him, if that’s what he expects.”

Miss Sophie’s expression faltered briefly, then she smiled genially. “He has no wish to force you into marriage, Miss Phoebe, of that I am certain. Please, surely you believe in the power of forgiveness? Will you give him another chance?”

Maddie swore she heard her sister’s teeth grinding. She didn’t want to

speak with the man any more than Phoebe did, but she did believe in forgiveness—she had to or else the Lord might never forgive her reckless actions with Dante.

And she might never forgive herself.

“I’ll speak to him,” Maddie offered.

“Whatever you do, do not allow him to get you alone,” Phoebe warned. “We don’t want him ruining you too.”

“Perhaps we can take a little turn around the vicarage garden,” Miss Sophie suggested so sweetly that even Phoebe could not ignore the offered arm.

Maddie didn’t bother reminding her sister that being a widow bought her a few more freedoms, though being spotted kissing any man would not be easily forgiven in their small community.

Which was an excellent reason to put a stop to her silly behavior with Dante.

Straightening her shoulders, she headed over to where Mr. Woodward still lingered. He greeted her with a vaguely hopeful smile, and she glanced him up and down. He had been of so little consequence when he entered their small section of country society. They’d known him to be polite, well-dressed, and apparently from some sort of family money. But that was it.

Now they knew him as the ruiner of women.

And supposedly in love with her.

“My sister will not speak with you,” she declared. “And there is little you can say that will repair the damage you wrought.”

“I understand, really I do. I would not have left but—”

“You left my sister ruined.” She clutched her reticule tight between both hands lest she fall prey to the desire to smack him around the head with it.

“I received word that Sophie needed me most urgently. Had that not happened, I would have—”

“Married Phoebe?”

“Yes.”

He kept his gaze firm on hers and she searched for the lie but struggled to find it. Yet there was something in the carefully held features that were quite handsome yet were almost as though someone had been ordered to draw a standard handsome man.

Everything was even and perfect with little signs of life in them. She preferred a slightly scarred face perhaps. One with more creases even. Some

evidence of an interesting life lived. They knew so little of this man, she would not allow herself to be swayed by his sincere words yet.

“Well, you have no need to anymore. She has a much better opportunity now.”

He nodded. “I had heard.”

“Is that why you returned? Because you heard you were safe from having to wed her?”

“No, no, not at all. I always intended to spend Christmas here. I have come to love this village.” His pale gaze darkened. “And the people.”

She swallowed. She’d seen that look before—when Dante leaned in for a kiss. But something about the way his gaze remained firmly on hers, not even dropping to her lips made her want to stiffen against a shudder.

“I—”

He took a step closer. “I cannot help how I feel about you, Mrs. Seymour. I know I have no right to ask for your forgiveness, but please, is there anything I can do to make amends? Anything at all?”

Maddie studied him for a moment, his face open and sincere. Whatever feelings he had for her, though, were unrequited and would remain so.

“There is nothing you can do, Mr. Woodward. You have already done enough damage,” she said firmly.

He looked crestfallen, and she felt a pang of guilt. Perhaps he truly was sorry for what happened, but what was done, was done and she and Phoebe had to think only of the future.

She turned to leave, but he caught her hand. The sudden contact made her heart race, and she jerked her hand back instinctively.

“Please, Mrs. Seymour,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. “I know I’ve made a terrible mistake, but I can’t help how I feel about you. You’re the most captivating woman I’ve ever met, and I cannot stop thinking about you.”

Maddie felt something akin to pity stir inside her. This man was truly smitten with her, and she could see the pain in his eyes as she rebuffed him. “I’m sorry, Mr. Woodward,” she said, her voice softening. “But I can’t return your affections. I hope you can find it in your heart to move on and find happiness elsewhere.”

He hung his head and nodded. “I understand,” he said, his voice heavy with resignation. “Thank you for speaking with me, Mrs. Seymour.”

By the time Maddie returned to her sister, her father had joined Phoebe and

Miss Sophie offered her goodbyes before heading back to her brother.

“What did he say?” her sister asked as they followed their father down the lane toward the family home.

“Just that he was deeply sorry, and he always intended to do the right thing.”

Phoebe’s brows lifted. “And did you believe him?”

Maddie looked toward Mr. Woodward and his sister. His words were sincere, and he behaved exactly as a man ashamed of his behavior should. Yet she could not shake the sense of something strange lingering under those careful words and movements.

“Perhaps,” she said. “But we shall continue to keep our distance regardless.”

“Who would think such a horrible man would have such a lovely sister?”

“Indeed,” Maddie said, the tightness in her throat growing.

Phoebe deserved better than a sister who could not control herself and could very well ruin her only chance to be saved. Whatever was happening between her and Dante was over. From now on, she would behave as a sensible sister should and ensure this match went ahead, regardless of her feelings toward Dante.

Chapter Twelve

A headache began to form behind Dante's eyes. He pinched the bridge of his nose as the shopkeeper droned on. Between his mother and the near miss with the horse and kissing a woman he was most certainly not meant to be kissing, his time in Monmouthshire had been a disaster.

How was he meant to prove to society he was an upstanding gentleman if he couldn't prevent himself from kissing Maddie in the hedgerows of a maze?

Dante sighed and took a deep breath, trying to shake off his frustration. He needed to focus on the task at hand, and that was to gather information from the shopkeeper about the potential rider of the horse and whether the rider had really been aiming for him or whether it really was a mistake. If his mother hadn't arrived, he'd have been able to do this sooner.

He leaned in, feigning interest as the man rambled on about how difficult it was to hire the right sort of delivery boys, especially with Christmas fast approaching. He couldn't quite recall how they had even got to that topic.

As he listened, Dante's mind wandered back to the maze and the taste of Maddie's lips. It had been a moment of weakness, a moment he knew he shouldn't have indulged in. But there was something about her that drew him in, something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

With a final nod to the shopkeeper, Dante turned and made his way back to the next building down—the village pub. As he walked inside, a young woman in a cloak met his gaze. He couldn't properly make out her features in the gloom of the building, but she moved swiftly from her seat at the rear of the room and breezed past him. She ignored his nod of acknowledgement and kept her head down. He turned to watch her leave but the only evidence of her being in the building was the fragrance of lavender lingering amongst the yeasty smell of hops.

Dante frowned and shrugged. A girl who wasn't meant to be here perhaps? Or maybe she was waiting for someone and didn't wish to be spotted.

The taproom was empty save for the barkeep who whistled as he slapped a wet cloth on the bar and swished it across the surface with aplomb.

“Do you know who that woman was?” Dante thrust a thumb toward the door.

“What woman?”

“She was here only moments ago.” He pointed toward where she had sat. “Sitting there.”

The wiry chap lifted his shoulders. “Didn’t see no woman but I was bringing up the barrels from the cellar.” He nodded behind him to the row of four wooden barrels. “What can I get you?”

“A porter.”

The man poured the drink with efficiency and scraped the coins off the bar with equal speed. “You’re the Countess of Porchester’s son, are you not?”

Dante took the tankard and rested on a slightly wobbly stool. “The very same.”

“Heard you were here to wed Miss Phoebe. That true?”

“Perhaps.”

“They’re a good family, no matter what people say, and haven’t we all made mistakes before?”

Dante tried not to think about the numerous mistakes he’d made in his younger years. Even now he was making them with Maddie.

He took a sip of the porter and sighed. “I’m not sure what will happen with Miss Phoebe. We have some...complications to sort out.”

“Aye, women can be a complication. Good thing there’s always a remedy for that.” The barkeep winked.

Dante shook his head. As much as he enjoyed the occasional dalliance, he knew that wasn’t the answer to his problems.

Anyway, he also needed to focus on whether people were really after him. He found it hard to believe anyone had discovered him in Monmouthshire, given the state of the roads and how slow news would move at this time of year. His sister and brother-in-law had been lucky to make it intact and his mother had come from Bath. Monmouthshire was a long way from London.

It was a possibility, however. But what should he do? Move on? Leave Phoebe to her fate? He wasn’t certain he could do that to her or Maddie.

“By the way, have you seen any strangers in the area recently?”

“We don’t get many visitors here. Save for you, my lord.” The man tossed the cloth in a nearby bucket of water. “You expecting someone?”

“I hope not,” Dante muttered.

“Well, I’ll be sure to let you know if I see anyone out of the ordinary. Lord knows in a small village like this, not much goes unnoticed.”

Dante finished his porter and stood up from the stool. “Thank you, I appreciate it.”

The barkeep nodded and went back to cleaning the glasses. Dante made his way outside and into the crisp, cold air. He pulled his coat tighter around him and looked around the village, trying to spot anything out of the ordinary. But everything seemed to be in its usual place.

As Dante walked down the cobblestoned streets of the village, his thoughts drifted back to Maddie. He couldn’t help but wonder what she was doing at that very moment. Was she thinking about him? Did she regret their kiss as much as he did? Or did she revel in the forbidden nature of their attraction?

He walked over to his horse and untied the reins from the hitching post. His efforts to discover who tried to run him down had been for nought. Dante rather imagined his sisters would have something to say for his investigative efforts, given that in his absence they had joined an investigative society and apparently solved any number of mysteries. He wished like hell they were here, but was grateful they weren’t in any danger.

“Come on, Pepper,” he said to the horse. “Let’s ride hard before your master loses his mind entirely.”

Making his way through the village, he urged his mount faster when they reached the road between the village and his estate.

Not much had altered since the morning, and an icy sheen covered the leaves of the hedges. A swirling fog rose from the frozen fields, giving the farmhouses in the distance a hazy glow.

His breath misted in front of him, the exertion warming him swiftly. His days of wild abandon were behind him but that didn’t mean he couldn’t enjoy a ride as fast as a race on Rotten Row occasionally. Especially when it was most needed. Just for a moment, he needed to forget.

Forget his duties, forget his desires.

Forget the potential danger haunting his steps.

He slowed when he reached the outer gates and waved to the gatekeeper as he moved through them. The long road toward the house gave him plenty more time to build up a sweat and prepare himself for more questions from his mother. Most of them were probably to do with why a handsome, eligible man such as himself had yet to persuade Phoebe into matrimony.

Dante smirked to himself. His mother wasn't averse to scandal—few of the Musgraves were—but he could still picture the shock on her face if he told her the truth.

Well, Mother, I find myself distractingly attracted to her twin sister. Yes, I know it makes no sense. I agree, I hardly know her.

But there it was.

An attraction he had not expected nor wanted that he couldn't shake, an attraction that set fire to his very soul. In all his years of living an admittedly extremely bachelor lifestyle, he'd never felt anything like this.

As Dante rode toward the house, he couldn't help but feel a sense of dread creeping up on him. The closer he got to the estate, the more he felt like he was being watched. He looked around, scanning the area for any sign of danger, but everything appeared to be normal.

He was about to dismiss his concerns as mere paranoia when he heard a rustling in the bushes. His horse became agitated and whinnied, causing Dante to grip the reins tighter. The sooner they were home, the better.

"Let's move, Pepper," he urged the horse until the house came into view, the road down to it lined by tall oak trees.

He kept his gaze fixed upon the mansion and its prominent façade, bright with light, an open invitation to all who cared to approach.

The horse came to a sudden stop, throwing him forward from the force of it. Pepper's shrill neigh echoed all around. Before Dante could tighten his grip, the reins were ripped from his hands.

Dante hit the ground hard, his head spinning from the impact. He struggled to regain his bearings, his gaze darting around to locate his horse. As he eased himself up, he spied Pepper to the side of the road, restless but unharmed.

He groaned as he stood. "Unlike me, it seems."

His body was sore from the hard ground, but he'd recover. However, once he tried to put weight on his right leg, an agonizing stab shot through his body.

"Wonderful."

Seemed he'd twisted his knee or something. Just what he needed when someone might be after his head.

Teeth gritted, he hobbled slowly over to the horse. She allowed him to approach, take the reins, and offer a few soothing words.

"What happened there, eh, old girl?" He studied the road but could see no

holes or obvious causes of the fall.

Dante sighed and urged the horse slowly toward the house. He stopped abruptly only seconds later when he spied the length of rope slung between two trees.

“Well, I’ll be damned.”

A trap. One meant to ensnare anyone who rode down the road. He could feel the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end, and he knew that whoever had set the trap was still out there, watching and waiting.

He quickly untied the rope and glanced around. The estate was large enough that anyone could gain access if they were willing to climb the tall brick wall or use a ladder. Yet the front lawns were wide and open save for the trees to either side of him. He’d have spotted an intruder on the way down and he saw no movement, no strangers hiding behind tree trunks. Whoever had set the trap hadn’t intended to jump on him and collect their prize after his fall.

Perhaps they had hoped the fall would kill him then and there. Perhaps they intended to keep their hands clean of his blood.

His chest tightened.

There was no denying it—someone was certainly after him and they were willing to do more than call him out.

Dante pressed out a breath. He had to get inside and alert his household to the possible danger. He hobbled back, his knee throbbing in protest.

They reached the stable block in one piece, and Dante stroked Pepper’s neck. The horse’s coat was slick with perspiration, and Dante ran his hand along the animal’s flank, trying to calm his nerves. After explaining what happened to the stable boy, he entered the house through the rear and found the butler. Issuing orders to the man to have the grounds checked and for everyone to be on alert, he finally sank onto the sofa in the drawing room and slung his foot up onto a footstool.

“Is it true?”

The headache that had begun earlier in the day was turning into a full episode and Dante rested his elbow on the arm of the sofa and pressed his fingers to the side of his head.

“Is what true, Mother?” he asked, twisting slightly to spy her moving in a flurry toward him.

She dropped down in front of him and eyed his battered state. His breeches had seen better days and he suspected his knee had swollen so severely he

was going to have to be cut out of the damned things.

“I’m told you took a fall and there could be an intruder on the estate, and that you haven’t even requested a doctor.” She shook her head. “Oh my poor dear boy.”

He waved a hand. “I’m not a boy, Mother.”

“To me you always will be.”

“If you start reminding me that I will never, ever cease being your baby now, I might have to have Father come collect you and drag you home.”

“As if your father would ever do such a thing to me.” Her chin wobbled as she plucked at the tattered remains of his garments. “At the very least let me send for some ice.”

“Some ice would do nicely,” he agreed. “And bring some whiskey with it,” he called as his mother scurried off to fetch the ice.

He lounged back against the sofa and stared at the ornate ceiling above. He had two options—stay and fight or run and hide. He’d spent too long in hiding in his youth. He wasn’t certain he fancied repeating history this time, but the trouble was, he had little idea who he was even fighting.

Chapter Thirteen

Maddie pulled one end of the string binding the letter and shook her head. No amount of pulling and unwinding would get through the intricate knots her mother had created. Opening a letter from Mama was always an adventure, as though her letters might contain great secrets that could bring down England rather than the usual trivial gossip and complaints about her health.

She strode into the drawing room and pulled open the drawer of the writing bureau, rummaging through a collection of objects that rarely had any purpose, but no one knew where else to put them.

Finally, she came upon the scissors and sliced through the string, discarding it upon the top of the writing desk then sitting down to start work on the various folds and cuts that linked together so complexly that even the most determined of snoopers would give up swiftly enough.

Biting down on her bottom lip, she unfolded the first bit easily enough. Next came a little triangle, slipped through a small cut in the paper.

Maddie sighed. "Really, Mama?"

"A letter from Mama?" Phoebe paused to peer over Maddie's shoulder before sitting on the sofa and retrieving the embroidery hoop that had been wedged down the side of the seat.

"But of course."

"She will just be complaining about how ill she is."

"Most likely." Maddie finagled the tiny piece of paper open without it ripping.

"She will not be happy there is no news of an engagement yet." Her sister placed the hoop on her knees and grasped either side of it to stare into the distance. "The way things are going, there will never be news."

Maddie swallowed. It had been three days since they toured the gardens with Dante and his mother. There had been no word and no sighting of him at church. Had she scared him off? Or made him change his mind about the

match?

“I thought you did not want to marry him anyway,” Maddie reminded her as though it would somehow dislodge the guilt fluttering in her throat.

“Of course I do not wish to marry a stranger but there is only so long I can remain a single, ruined woman.” Her sister stared at the embroidery of a slightly ugly fox. “I know I behaved immaturely toward Lord Southwick.”

“Running away from him and climbing out of your window were not your finest moments but his mother adores you.”

“She used to. Perhaps she does not approve of me.”

“Nonsense.” Maddie shook her head vigorously. “Everyone loves you.”

“They liked me...until Mr. Woodward. And his return has not helped matters. Have you not noticed that no one at all has called on us since he came back?”

There was no denying that not even their most loyal of friends had not visited nor had they received any invitations. With Christmas fast approaching, they would usually expect to dine with many families and there would be at least two assembly dances in December.

If this continued, things would grow worse. Phoebe would be entirely ineligible, and their parents would become pariahs, unable to control their supposedly wayward daughter. It could even affect their father’s work as an architect, and though Maddie’s future was assured, she couldn’t afford to look after Phoebe and their mother should something happen to their father. Phoebe needed a future and that future had to be with Lord Southwick.

“Ah ha!” She pulled open the last fold of the letter and scanned the writing. “Oh dear.”

Phoebe hastened over and leaned over her shoulder. “Oh dear.”

Maddie handed the letter to Phoebe so her sister could read it properly.

“Mama is awfully dramatic,” murmured Phoebe, though Maddie heard the tremor of worry in her sister’s voice.

Their mother suffered an illness in her youth and had never recovered fully. Some Christmases, she scarcely rose from her bed to partake in the festivities for fear of a coughing fit.

“We’ll be lucky if she returns anytime soon,” Phoebe said. “Perhaps we should go to her.”

“We would be better off focusing on solving your situation,” Maddie declared.

Even if they reached the coast in a timely manner, there was no doubting

Phoebe's situation had brought on this latest bout of illness. Maddie doubted simply their company would improve the situation unless they also brought news of an engagement with them.

"I suppose I ought to seek out Lord Southwick."

"Arrive unannounced?" Maddie grimaced.

It wouldn't look very polite. However, she wasn't certain what other choice they had. For all they knew, Lord Southwick had returned to London never to be seen again.

Her heart hurt just imagining such a scenario.

But this wasn't about her, this was about her family.

"You could go to him," her sister suggested. "Take a little stroll perhaps."

Maddie peered up at her sister. "Just me?"

Phoebe nodded. "I've made a fool enough of myself already. I do not wish to make things worse, and you always were excellent at keeping the peace."

Maddie had to admit that her sister had a point. She supposed if Dante was still there, she could persuade him to give her sister another chance.

And perhaps it would be a chance to clear the air between them. "I'll go."

"Thank you, Maddie," Phoebe said with a small smile. "I hope everything goes well."

Maddie stood, smoothing down her skirts. "I'll return before supper."

She made her way to the door, taking a deep breath before turning the handle. The world outside was still and quiet, the only sound the rustling of leaves in the wind. The walk to the Earl of Portchester's estate was welcome even if she was uncertain about seeing Dante again or whether her mission was entirely futile. She kept a brisk pace, welcoming the slight rasp of air in her lungs and the warmth in her muscles.

After heading through the gatehouse, Maddie walked down the path, the crunch of the gravel breaking the silent chill around her. As she approached Dante's estate, tension wound its way through her. What if he didn't want to see her?

She shook the thought from her mind and forced herself to knock on the door. The door inched open, and the butler's face peered through the gap.

"Is Lord Southwick in?" Maddie asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Yes, ma'am. Shall I announce you?" He inched the door cautiously open, and Maddie frowned at the man's reticent behavior. Had there been some sort of order to keep her away? He opened the door further, his features relaxing after his gaze darted about somewhere behind her.

“No, thank you. I’ll wait.”

The butler’s mustache bristled. “I will return.”

Maddie stepped inside and waited in the grand hallway. She heard movement in the house and tried to ignore the flutter low in her stomach. All she had to do was remember why she was here. She eyed the tall arched windows and the painted ceiling, her hands clasped tightly in front of her.

The butler reappeared from a side door. “Won’t you follow me?” he said, holding out his hands for her coat and gloves. She eased off her hat and added it to the pile before following the man through two rooms she had yet to see during her time here previously.

Finally, she entered a small room in the corner of the house, facing out over the gardens. From here, she could see the maze.

Giving herself a mental shake, she turned her attention to Dante, who rose slowly from his seat in front of the writing table.

“Mrs. Seymour, what a surprise. What brings you here?” he asked, his voice polite but distant.

Maddie took a deep breath and tried to steady her voice. “I—”

He wavered in his stance slightly and grimaced. She hastened forward and put a hand to his arm. “Dante, is something the matter?”

He glanced to where her bare fingers touched his jacket, and she snatched her hand back.

“I fell from my horse, unfortunately.” He tapped his leg. “Twisted my knee. I’ve been hobbling about ever since.”

“Oh goodness. You must sit, please!”

A combination of relief and worry stirred through her. She hadn’t frightened him off but a fall from his horse could have done far more damage than a sprained knee. Goodness, he could have been killed. Images of him twisted and bloodied upon the ground assailed her.

“Do not look so scared, Maddie. I am quite well.”

Maddie attempted to school her expression into something neutral. She had no reason to feel anything more than the sort of concern one might feel for a vague acquaintance.

Dante waited for her to sit before easing himself gingerly onto the armchair to her right. She peered at her hands and spied a little ink upon the fingertip she’d been running down an old book. She quickly laced her hands and hoped he hadn’t noticed.

“I came to speak to you about my sister Phoebe.”

“Ah yes, your sister.” Dante’s tone remained distant.

“I know she didn’t leave the best impression on you, but I assure you she is deeply regretful for her actions. She is frustrated and angry, but—” she sucked in a breath “—I believe she has feelings for you.”

The last part was a lie, but Maddie had no doubt, given time, Phoebe would fall for Dante. How could she not?

Dante raised an eyebrow. “And what of your feelings?”

Maddie felt her cheeks flush. “My feelings are not the matter at hand. I came here to ask if you would be willing to give Phoebe another chance. She has been ill with worry over the situation.”

Dante sighed, his gaze drifting out of the window. “It would be a lie for me to say I have not been considering my options. It would be unfair of me to string Phoebe along if I am not truly interested in marrying her.”

Maddie felt her heart sink. “So you have no interest in her?”

Dante turned back to her, his gaze meeting hers. “I did not say that. I simply mean that I need to consider my own feelings as well as hers.”

“But it is to be an arranged marriage. Surely feelings do not come into this?”

“They shouldn’t.” His gaze lingered on hers. “But the heart cannot always be tamed, can it?”

Maddie felt a warmth spread through her chest at his words. Could it be possible that Dante felt something for her too? Something more than mere desire? She quickly pushed the thought away. This was about Phoebe, not her own romantic fantasies.

He sighed. “Maddie, we cannot deny what happened between us.”

“It was a mistake.”

He eyed her for a few moments, then nodded. “It was.”

Maddie could feel her throat tighten. She had come here to fix things with Phoebe, not to hear Dante admit that what they shared was a mistake, no matter how true that was.

But even as he said the words, she could see the heat in his eyes, the way his gaze flickered over her lips.

She swallowed hard. “What do you wish to do?”

Dante leaned back in his chair, his expression thoughtful. “What do you wish, Maddie?”

“Phoebe needs you.”

Dante stood, wincing slightly as he did so. “I appreciate your concern for

your sister. You are a loyal sibling. And I shall do what you wish. If Phoebe will have me, I shall wed her.”

Maddie nodded, her heart heavy with disappointment and guilt. Had she secretly wished for something more of an admission of his feelings? She stood up and smoothed her skirts, preparing to take her leave.

“I thank you for your time, but I should leave you to recuperate.” The formality of the conversation made her tone tighten and she felt ridiculous. “I shall convey your message to my sister and perhaps we can arrange for the two of you to meet again soon.”

Dante nodded, his expression unreadable. Maddie made her way to the door, her heart heavy despite the fact she had repaired things between Dante and Phoebe. And she knew full well why she felt this way.

As she opened the door, Dante’s voice stopped her in her tracks.

“Maddie, wait.”

She turned slowly, her throat dry.

Dante stepped closer to her, his eyes dark and intense. “I may have agreed to wed your sister, but that doesn’t mean I have forgotten what happened between us, Maddie. I cannot deny the pull I feel toward you, even if I know I shouldn’t.”

Maddie’s eyes widened at Dante’s admission, caught off guard by his sudden change of tone. The heat in his gaze was unmistakable, and she felt her cheeks flush with a mixture of desire and apprehension. This wasn’t supposed to happen, not after what had transpired between them.

“Dante, please don’t,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “We can’t—”

But before she could finish her sentence, Dante closed the distance between them and taken her in his arms, his lips crashing down on hers in a fierce, possessive kiss. Maddie gasped, surprised by the intensity of his embrace, but it only took a moment for her to respond, kissing him back as passionately as he was kissing her.

For what felt like an eternity, they stood there together, lost in each other’s embrace, their bodies pressed tightly against each other. Dante’s hands roamed over her back, pulling her closer until he broke away abruptly.

“It ends here,” he said, his tone low. “It has to.”

Her lips warm, her body shaking, Maddie nodded. “Yes,” she agreed, voice husky. “It ends here.”

Chapter Fourteen

Decorated with strands and foliage and strung with reams of berries apparently created by the children at the village school, the assembly hall reminded Dante that Christmas was upon them.

And so was his mother's deadline of a Christmas engagement. At least she had opted to remain home tonight, so he didn't have her hovering over him and watching his every move.

But given there had been no more attempts on his life, and he'd managed not to kiss Maddie anymore, there was no reason to delay things with Phoebe. He simply had to use his well-practiced charm on her, and he wagered they'd be engaged within a few days, and he could return to his family with his head held high.

At least he hoped so. There was the chance someone still wanted his head on a platter, but Phoebe was his best bet at avoiding such a fate. He'd be a respectable, married man upon his return. No one would threaten death upon a newlywed surely?

He grimaced and watched the dancers move up and down the line with far more energy than he'd ever witnessed at London balls. Maybe he'd be better off staying in Monmouthshire for a while.

Whether Phoebe would mind that, he did not know. In fact, he knew nothing of her. She didn't help matters much by always dashing off, but he hadn't tried that hard either. Now was the time to act with the honor and dignity he should have been displaying his whole life. For once, he was going to ensure no more scandal followed the name of Musgrave thanks to him.

"Oh Lord," Phoebe muttered beside him, her shoulders stiffening as she cradled her second glass of punch. She drained it quickly.

Well, he knew one thing, he supposed. Phoebe enjoyed a good drink.

"Oh Lord," Maddie said too, and he followed her gaze toward a tall, slender man dressed a little too smartly for a village dance.

"Let me guess," he said tightly, tightening his grip on his drink. "The man

who ruined Phoebe.”

Maddie nodded. “He returned over a week ago, but we have only had the misfortune of seeing him but once.”

“He wanted to apologize.” Phoebe rolled her eyes.

Considering the man had ruined Phoebe and abandoned her, Dante couldn’t quite believe the ladies were so calm.

He took a step forward, ready to confront the man, but Maddie grabbed his arm. “Please don’t, Dante. It’s not worth it.”

He glared at her, then at Phoebe. “He doesn’t deserve to stand here as though he has done nothing. What he did to you was unforgivable.”

Phoebe shrugged, her gaze distant. “It doesn’t matter now. It’s in the past.”

Dante eased out a long breath. Letting the man simply live his life did not sit well with him but it wasn’t his place to interfere—at least not yet.

“Anyway,” said Phoebe brightly. “It is our turn to dance.”

Dante nodded his head and avoided Maddie’s gaze, aware of how she watched him closely. Foolishly, he hoped she was recalling their kiss—a kiss he hadn’t been able to resist, knowing it would be their last. He really was a selfish cad and both women deserved better.

Dante led Phoebe to the center of the busy room and lined up with the other dancers. He could feel her tense beneath his fingers, and he wanted to offer her some comfort, but he had no idea what to say.

A slower dance was announced, giving Dante the opportunity to talk to Phoebe properly. He dug through his mind for something useful and only managed to come up with, “You dance very well.”

For all his years as a practiced rake, he was doing a terrible job at charming the woman he was supposed to wed.

“Thank you.” She managed a small smile that he swore was slightly pained. “You do too.”

“I’m, uh, I’m sorry that man is here.”

“Me too. I had rather hoped he had fallen in a bog somewhere.”

Dante laughed and swiftly straightened his expression to match the tone of the somber dance. Perhaps this wouldn’t be so bad. At least she had a sense of humor.

“Accidents can be arranged, you know.” He flashed a wicked grin.

“I should rather expect you wish to stay away from accidents, my lord.” She glanced down at his leg. “Did you not have rather a tumble recently?”

“I’m pleased to say I’m back to full health.”

“Maddie was quite concerned for you,” she said airily as she took a step back then forward, connecting her hand with his.

“Well, that’s, uh, nice of her.”

“My sister cares for everyone around. It is her greatest strength and her biggest weakness.”

“You consider such a thing a weakness?”

“It can be when it places her in positions that leave her vulnerable.”

He met Phoebe’s gaze for several moments, searching for her meaning. Did she know about the kisses they’d shared? Was she speaking of something else? Before he could figure out to what she was referring, Phoebe twirled away.

He wasn’t sure what else to say, so instead they danced in uncomfortable silence until the last few bars of music were played and they returned to Maddie’s side. Another woman had joined them, and he recognized her as the lady he’d spied in the pub the day of his accident.

“Lord Southwick may I introduce Miss Sophie Woodward.” Maddie gestured to the petite woman who eyed him demurely as she dipped her head.

“Miss Sophie Woodward,” he repeated. “As in—” He glanced toward Mr. Woodward who had found himself quite happily ensconced in a group of village men.

None of them seemed at all concerned that he had accosted Phoebe, which made Dante want to rage about the room. He couldn’t fathom such a thing happening to his sisters and people simply standing by and embracing a man who behaved so terribly.

He supposed he understood why someone wanted his head but he’d rather this father whoever he was pursued the right damned man. For all his faults, Dante had never treated a woman so poorly.

“I’m afraid so,” Miss Sophie said softly. “But my brother is here to try to make amends.”

“And a fine job he is doing of it too,” he muttered.

“Oh I do so love this dance.”

He glanced at Miss Sophie, gaze narrow. He knew a manipulation when he heard one. Considering the sweet, delicate package the words came in, he should be surprised, but he wasn’t. He’d known enough women in his lifetime to understand they would never cease surprising him. Hell, his sisters could still shock him to this day.

Still, he offered to lead her to the dance floor, concluding it was better to

find out why she might wish for a moment with him and if she was really the manipulative sort of person, he wanted her away from Maddie and Phoebe.

Most especially Maddie. As Phoebe warned him, her sister was the kindly sort, as proven by her willingness to embrace the sister of such a man as a companion.

Miss Sophie uttered all the right words, proving to be a proficient dancer and an intelligent, well-spoken woman. He reckoned many men in the room were envious of him. But the words and the moves felt practiced. The little slide across his shoulders, the glance at him from under her eyelashes. Once upon a time, he might have even fallen for such behaviors, but not now.

Not since he'd met Maddie.

Kissing her had been unpracticed and wild, and nothing like he'd experienced in his life.

And he needed to forget it.

Before the last strains of music subsided, Miss Sophie took a little stumble and gripped his upper arm.

"Are you well?"

"A little overheated I think." She waved a hand in front of her face. "This is but a small assembly hall."

"It is," he agreed. The building was filled to the rafters the scent of smoke and fragrance mingled with the heat projecting from too many bodies in such a tiny space.

"I could do with some air."

Dante kept his smug expression to himself and led her toward the rear of the building by the open doors. This woman wanted something from him, and he wanted to find out what. He was beginning to sense she was not so different from her brother.

"Goodness, that's better." She tucked herself around the side of the door, not far enough out into the gardens to cause scandal but away from prying eyes.

Bitter air broke through the thick heat of the hall and Miss Sophie leaned against the brick exterior, tilting her head back and offering him a view of her pretty profile and long neck.

Oh, he knew exactly where this was going.

She sighed and pulled at the neckline of her gown. He kept his gaze upon a plant in a stone pot nearby.

"I really do feel quite faint. May I lean upon you?"

“Of course.” He offered an arm and she clung to it as though she were drowning in rough seas.

Dante felt the weight of her body pressing against him and a part of him wanted to push her away and call her out on her manipulation. But he had to play his cards right. He had to find out what she wanted and why she was so desperate to be alone with him.

“You’re so warm,” she whispered as she shifted against him.

“I thought you wished to cool off,” he replied, keeping his expression neutral.

“Is it true what they say about you, my lord?”

He raised an eyebrow. “What do they say?”

“That you’re a masterful lover. That you’ve never left a woman unsatisfied.”

Dante felt a cold chill run down his spine. This woman was brazen, and he didn’t like it one bit. “I’m afraid they say many things about me, Miss Sophie. But I assure you, most statements are false.”

“Perhaps—” she moved close and danced her fingers over his chest “—you could show me which are true.”

Dante’s hand shot out and he caught the woman’s wandering fingers in his own. He held them firmly, and then he leaned in to whisper into her ear, “I think it’s time we headed back inside, Miss Sophie. Your brother shall be missing you.” His tone was low and firm, leaving no room for argument.

Miss Sophie’s eyes widened, her earlier confidence draining away as she stepped back. “Yes, of course. I’m sorry, my lord,” she stammered, looking flustered.

Dante gave her a tight-lipped smile, and then he led her back into the hall. He scanned the room, searching for Maddie and Phoebe, and when he spotted them being bothered by Mr. Woodward, he marched over, leaving Woodward’s sister far behind.

Had that been what that was about? His sister hoped to distract him so he could no longer play protector to the sisters.

“Dante, there you are,” Maddie said with patent relief as he approached. “Mr. Woodward has been insisting on a dance with me, but I already told him I am promised to you for the next one.”

“But of course you are.” Dante caught onto the fib quickly and offered his arm.

Woodward looked as though he’d swallowed his tongue and spluttered to

say something, but Dante cut him off with a threatening glare before he led Maddie to the dance floor.

They moved smoothly together, their bodies in perfect sync as they glided across the floor. Dante couldn't help but feel a sense of contentment and peace when he was with Maddie. She was different from any woman he had ever met. And he found himself wanting to be near her, to protect her even more fiercely.

"I normally enjoy the Christmas dances," she said with a sigh. "It's different this year."

"That wretched man being in attendance probably does not help."

"Not one jot," she agreed.

"I'll confess, I scarcely remembered it as nearly Christmas until today."

"Things have been a little...strange lately."

He nodded. Strange was one way of putting it. He'd been enjoying his bachelor lifestyle not so long ago and now he was set to be engaged and had found himself recklessly attracted to the wrong woman. There would be many men he knew who would tell him he should simply transfer his attraction from one twin to the other, but if only it were that simple.

"How do you normally spend Christmas?" Maddie asked as they weaved seamlessly around one another.

"For many years, I remained abroad, but last year I was with all my sisters and nieces and nephews in Bath."

"That sounds wonderful."

He smiled. He'd missed out on too many years with them, hiding away. There was no chance he wanted to have to flee the country again.

"It's a noisy affair but I enjoy it."

"I adore being with my family too. Even when I was married, we always met up with my parents and cousins on Christmas day."

"I imagine this one shall be slightly different."

Maddie's expression dulled. "My cousins won't be visiting that is for certain. They cannot risk the scandal of Phoebe's behavior touching them."

Dante swallowed. It was all on him. Maddie's future happiness and Phoebe's reputation. He knew that. So why was he not fighting harder to sway Phoebe into an engagement?

By the end of the dance, he understood full well why. He and Maddie talked easily, they laughed about the same things. She reminded him of all the things he loved about women—she was so strong for Phoebe, so

determined to do the right thing, yet never failed to offer him kindness and warmth. He was falling for her, and he knew it was a dangerous game to play. But he couldn't help himself. He wanted her more than anything.

Chapter Fifteen

Wrapping her hands around the warm cup, Maddie closed her eyes and inhaled the comforting fragrance of tea leaves. The early morning sunshine spilled in through the tiny windows, casting long shadows on the uneven floorboards of her cottage. She took a long sip and watched the sun creep up above the horizon, feeling the warmth slip down her throat.

It was an extravagance given her modest income, but she couldn't resist at least one cup a day and she needed it more than ever today. The dance should have been the start of the end of all of this. Phoebe and Dante would make a suitable display of courting and gossip would cease.

At least having Dante at her side meant no one had anything snide to say but she didn't think they were any closer to fixing things. Phoebe had been reluctant to talk about Dante and Maddie could hardly talk frankly with her in such a public place.

Maddie finished her tea and opened the front door, stepping out to gaze at the picturesque countryside, frost still clinging to the hills. It was peaceful, but her mind was anything but calm.

She had been drawn to Dante since the moment they met, his blue eyes piercing through her soul and his deep voice sending shivers down her spine. But she had never been one to act on impulse, not when it came to matters of the heart. Colin had courted her for two years and had it not been for her mother fretting about having unwed daughters, Maddie might never have married him. So what changed?

And why, for the first time in her life, was it so difficult to do the right thing?

The chill in the air didn't help her silent thoughts of Dante any more than the warm tea did so she turned and followed the path back to the cottage.

"Maddie?"

She twisted and waved when she spotted her sister hastening down the path. Dread knotted in her stomach, though. She'd been lying to Phoebe for

too long and she wasn't certain how much longer she could take it. They told each other everything, no matter how awful the truth might be, but if Phoebe knew how Maddie felt, she would step aside, of that Maddie was certain.

Phoebe needed Dante to save her. Maddie would be fine.

She forced a bright smile and lifted her chin. A little heartache never killed anyone.

"You didn't say you were intending to come over." Maddie said, ushering her sister inside. "I just brewed some tea."

Phoebe followed her into the cottage, removed her coat, and hung it on the hat stand along with her hat. She stuffed her gloves into the pockets of the coat and rubbed her hands together.

"We barely got a moment to talk yesterday."

Maddie set the teapot on the small round dining table, and they sat opposite each other.

"We had a moment—when we left," she reminded her sister.

Phoebe gave a small smile. "We did, but I wasn't certain what to say."

"About Dante?"

She dropped two spoons of sugar into her cup and stirred it slowly, her gaze remaining on the swirling liquid. "I tried, Maddie, really I did, but I do not think I can marry him."

"But he will save you!"

"From a life as a spinster, yes, but will marrying a man I do not love really save me?"

"You do not have to marry for love," Maddie whispered.

"I know you did not love Colin, but we cannot *all* be like you, Maddie. I need great love and passion in my life."

Maddie couldn't help but wonder if she did too. She loved her cottage and where she lived but she'd often envied the heroes and heroines in books who adventured and loved with great freedom and recklessness. Perhaps that *more* was some great love too. She didn't think she'd ever forget the way Dante looked at her.

"Besides..." Phoebe tilted her head and eyed Maddie "I rather think you have feelings for Dante."

Maddie's gaze flew to her sister's. "What? No?"

"Maddie, you are my twin sister. There is no one who knows you better than I. I know when my sister is hiding something, and I know when she's in love."

“I’m not—”

“I watched you two dancing and I’m certain no one else noticed it, but I did. You love him and he loves you.”

Maddie’s heart skipped a beat at her sister’s words. She had been trying so hard to deny her feelings for Dante, even to herself, but the truth was impossible to ignore. The way he looked at her, the way his touch sent her practically delirious. How could she deny it?

But what could she do? She couldn’t betray her sister like that. She had to put her sister’s needs first, even if it meant sacrificing her own happiness.

“I can’t do that to you, Phoebe,” Maddie whispered, tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. “I can’t take him away from you.”

Phoebe reached across the table and took Maddie’s hand. “You’re not taking him away from me, Maddie. I don’t want him. I want you to be happy.”

Maddie shook her head, feeling a tear escape down her cheek. “The shame of it all...”

“Is on Mr. Woodward,” Phoebe interjected.

“And it’s my fault.”

“No, it is very much his.” She squeezed Maddie’s hand. “I know you always wish to look after me and you have for many years, protecting me from my mistakes, even when I did not deserve protecting.”

“You’re my sister,” Maddie managed to squeak out.

“And you’re mine. Can I not wish for your happiness as much as you wish for mine?”

“Lord Southwick was to save you.”

Phoebe’s lips quirked. “If he wished to really save me, he could have proposed long ago.”

“He’s not—that is...” Maddie tried to swallow the knot in her throat. “He’s a good man.”

“I do not disagree, however, he is a good man in love with you, Maddie, not me.”

“What will we tell Papa? Mama?”

Phoebe shrugged. “I’ll think of something, and Mama will find her strength once she realizes you are marrying the son of an earl.”

“I do not know if he wishes to marry me.”

Her sister’s smile grew smug. “Oh I do. Besides, we shall tell Mama that your new husband will ensure no more scandal touches our family and I

might even be able to find myself another eligible lord.”

“Mama would like that,” Maddie admitted, her heart still thudding hard in her chest.

Was Phoebe right? Did Dante truly love her? And could she really turn her back on her family and take what she wanted for the first time in her life?

“You should go and see him.”

Maddie eased out a shuddery breath, her mind spinning with the realization that Phoebe had seen through her facade. “Phoebe, you don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Don’t I?” Phoebe leaned forward. “Maddie, I love you and I want you to be happy. If Dante is the one who can give you that happiness, then you need to go after him.”

“But what about you?” Maddie protested. “What will you do?”

“I will find my own way,” Phoebe said firmly. “I cannot marry for anything less than love, and I will not let anyone else dictate my future.”

Maddie was torn between her love for Dante and her loyalty to her sister. But the thought of a life without Dante was almost unbearable.

“You should go to him. Now.”

She never thought of herself as particularly bold nor did she think of herself as a coward. Now, however, she wasn’t certain she had the courage to see him. What if Phoebe was wrong? What if it was mere passing passion and she had misunderstood the severity of his feelings?

“You’re no fool, Maddie. You would not fall for a man who did not return your feelings.”

Her gaze shot to her sister’s. “Sometimes it would be a lot easier if you did not know me so well.”

Phoebe smirked. “Would it, though?”

Maddie let out a small laugh, feeling a weight lifted off her chest. “I suppose not.”

“Go to him. Find out the truth. And if he does love you, promise me you won’t hold back for my sake.”

Maddie nodded, feeling the tingle of tears in her eyes again. “I promise.”

With a final squeeze of her sister’s hand, Maddie stood and donned her coat and hat. She paused at the door, turning back to Phoebe. “Thank you. For everything.”

Phoebe gave her a small smile. “Always, my dear sister.”

Maddie left the cottage, her pulse pounding so fiercely she felt it in her

fingertips as snowflakes began to drift lazily from the sky, cool against her warm cheeks. She couldn't believe she was doing this, putting her own happiness above her family's reputation.

But for the first time in her life, she was willing to take that risk. She loved Dante, and she couldn't let him go without knowing if he felt the same. It wouldn't be fair to either of them and it wouldn't be fair to Phoebe.

By the time she made it to the village, the snow fell harder, covering her coat in a layer of white. A hand to her hat, Maddie forged forward through the wind that whipped through the small village. It rustled her skirts and sent shop signs and shutters banging against the walls.

The man at the gatehouse of the estate let her through the huge iron gates, eyeing her likely sodden state with a look up and down and a raised brow. The walk down the road took what felt like an eternity, her throat dry, her hands clammy beneath her gloves. Everything told her to turn back, to give up on such selfishness. But somehow, she forged on and reached the towering wooden doors of the stately home.

Pulling the doorbell, she stared up at the house with her heart thudding in her throat. The door creaked open, and a footman answered. She wondered if the butler was getting sick of the sight of her.

"Oh, good afternoon. Is Lord Southwick home?"

The man shook his head. "I am afraid you just missed him, ma'am. He went for a walk, I believe. The countess is home if you would like to request an audience with her."

She shook her head. "No, thank you. Please do not disturb her. I-I had best be off." She turned on her heel and marched away from the house. She did not know why but somehow, she just knew where he'd gone. If he had gone for a walk, there was one place she would find him.

As she made her way up the hill, past the Navy memorial, her curls began to sag around her face and stuck to her cheeks. She pushed one away and persevered on until she emerged from the trees and the Kymin revealed itself, in all its white glory ahead. Snow clung to the roof and the surrounding stone.

Gulping down a breath, she took her skirts in hand and headed toward the lone figure standing just under the shelter of the building.

Dante started when he saw her, removing his hands from his pockets and straightening. His hat had been abandoned on the nearby bench and he looked as tired as she felt. She had not been the only one to have a sleepless night it seemed.

“I-I called at the house for you.” The words came out quickly, as though they could somehow hide all the emotion that seemed to flood her whenever she saw him. From his expression, she had not done a good enough job of hiding it, however.

His chest rose and fell as he took a great breath, and he stepped toward her. They met midway down the path leading toward the building. The snow continued, leaving a light dusting on his lashes and hair. His gaze searched hers and it made her heart ache—especially now she knew what she must say.

“How did you know I’d be here?”

“I—” How could she explain? That she simply knew. Just as she’d known many things when she’d first set eyes on him. Things she had no logical explanation for. She gave a helpless shrug.

Dante seemed to understand. He peered up at the skies as the snow grew heavier and took her hand to lead her into the shelter of the Kymin. The snow pattered on the tiny windows that sat on four sides of the round building.

Maddie unpicked the two pins holding her hat in place to lay them on the bench alongside his hat. Sitting, she teased her hair away from her face and eyed Dante. His hair curled, damp and temping. His expression remained solemn.

It was as if he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. She reached out to touch his face but hesitated, unsure if it was the right thing to do.

Dante moved suddenly, his hand cupping her cheek. “Maddie,” he whispered, his voice husky. “I need to tell you something.”

Maddie’s heart raced as Dante’s fingers stroked her cheek. She leaned into the touch. Her body yearned for his touch, for his embrace.

Dante shifted closer and closer still until his lips brushed against hers in a feather-light kiss. Powerless to do anything other than blink at him, she held her breath.

“I love you,” he said softly, his breath warm against her skin. He drew back to meet her gaze. “And I know it’s wrong, and I know Phoebe needs me and she—”

Doubt fled. The voices of consternation vanished. Courage rose up in her chest and she felt so like one of those brave, bold heroines in her books that she almost laughed.

Maddie pressed her lips firmly to his, silencing him and when she drew

back, the furrow in his brow had softened. She pressed her hands to either side of his face. “I love you too.”

Chapter Sixteen

Dante pressed his forehead to hers, absorbing the words for a moment. She loved him. His Maddie loved him. He couldn't fathom why or how or what the future even held for them but for now it didn't matter.

What did matter, though, was that she understood full well quite who she was getting involved with.

"Maddie, there's something I need to tell you," he said, his voice low.

"What is it?" Her brow furrowed as he eased back from her.

Dante took a deep breath and gripped her gloved hands. "I'm not who you think I am," he said.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"I mean that my name isn't really Dante," he said. "It's a name that was given to me—"

"Your mother calls you Dante."

"Reluctantly."

"Many men have nicknames..."

"I was nicknamed Dante during my time in Europe. You might understand why given its meaning."

"Devil?" She glanced at her skirts. "It seemed an odd choice of name for a loving mother to bestow upon a son but—"

"I have a reputation back in London. It is not entirely unearned."

"For being the devil?"

He eased out a long breath. This could be it. He could scare her off entirely but since their dance last night, he had to be honest with her. "For being a rake," he said. "I've had my fair share of women, Maddie. I don't want to lie to you or lead you on."

Her expression didn't change, but he could feel the tension in her hands. "We both know that reputations can be lost because of a mere mistake. I refuse to believe that's all you are. There's more to you than that, Dante."

He let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you for saying so, though it is important

you understand the extent of my reputation.”

“I appreciate your honesty,” she said. “But I also believe that people can change.”

“Change?” He raised an eyebrow. “Do you think I can change?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “But I know that I see something in you worth fighting for.”

Dante’s heart swelled at her words. “And what is that, Maddie?”

“Your kindness,” she said. “Your determination to do the right thing by Phoebe. Your patience. Even when Phoebe was determined to lead you on a merry chase, you remained here.”

Dante felt his cheeks heat up at her words. He had always thought of himself as a selfish man, only looking out for his own interests. But here was Maddie, seeing something in him that he had never seen before. He wanted to prove her right, to show her that he was more than his reputation. For so long, it had been hard to think of himself as anything other than a scandalous Musgrave.

But if Maddie saw something more in him, she had to be right. Maddie was never wrong.

Her eyes sparkled as she looked up at him, and Dante felt himself drowning in the depths of her gaze. “I think I do,” she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper. “I see you, Dante. The real you. And I’m not afraid.”

Dante’s heart swelled with emotion as he looked down at her, feeling a fierce protectiveness rise up within him. He would do anything to keep her safe, to make her happy. “I won’t let you down,” he vowed. “Whatever you need from me, I’ll do it.”

“For now, you can tell me your real name.”

He smirked. “Basil.”

She blinked several times. “Basil?” she repeated.

“You can see why Dante stuck.”

“I must admit, it is hard to see you as a Basil.”

He chuckled. “You do not have to use it. I’ve never liked it much, though somehow I’m beginning to loathe it less since coming here.”

“Basil or Dante, I don’t care,” Maddie said, her gaze softening. “I just care about you. But perhaps I can use it when it is just the two of us.”

“So there will be times when it is just the two of us?”

Her throat bobbed. “I certainly hope so.”

He glanced at the small window behind her, noting the snow piling up

against the glass. “Those times shall have to wait, I think. The snow is growing quite heavy.”

They both rose and he took Maddie’s hand. It was truly astonishing what something so simple as holding her hand could do. It left him feeling almost breathless with a sense of certainty that, no matter what, this woman would be there for him.

They stood in the entranceway to the building for a moment longer, watching the snow fall outside the window in silence. Dante could feel Maddie’s body heat radiating toward him, and he fought the urge to wrap his arms around her and hold her tight. He knew that he had to be patient, that they had yet to figure out the future, but so much of him wanted to drag her back inside the building and keep her there where his reputation could not touch either of them.

“I’ll see you home,” he offered.

Dante’s heart pounded in his chest as he retrieved their hats aided Maddie with hers and together they made their way down the hill, hand in hand. He could scarce believe she truly loved him, real name and all. In the past, he had been so used to people wanting something from him that he hadn’t thought anyone would value him for who he truly was. He was a Musgrave, known for a good time and scandal. But Maddie saw beyond it all and seemed to understand the real man beneath.

The snow continued to fall in great clumps, hindering their progress. Dante hardly noticed how little progress they’d made as they talked of his time in Europe, of her dreams of exploring the countryside further, of their experiences of having sisters.

It was only when they reached the edge of his family estate that he noticed how pale her skin had become. To make matters worse, the wind picked up, quickly putting a stop to any further conversation as they were battered by the blistering cold that turned everything white.

Maddie stumbled slightly, and Dante grabbed her hand tightly, helping her walk through the snow. A feeling of protectiveness washed over him as he watched her stumble and weave through the deep piles of snow. He wanted nothing more than to get her safely back inside where she could warm up out of the cold winter weather.

He tugged her close, cradling her against his body. “We should wait at my house until the storm is over.”

“I’m a state. Your mother—”

“My mother would have my head if I kept you out in this storm for much longer and it’s too far to your house.”

Maddie’s cheeks were stained pink, and she looked up at him with a hint of apprehension in her eyes. Finally, she nodded.

“The sooner you are in the warmth, the better.”

He led her toward the large, imposing mansion, his heart thudding with anticipation. All he wanted was to keep Maddie safe. He was determined to do whatever it took and if that meant returning to London and dueling every man who wanted his head, he would. He wasn’t certain how his mother would take the news that he wasn’t planning to marry the woman she’d chosen for him, nor quite how Mr. Bloomsbury would cope, but he trusted Maddie and Phoebe could manage their father.

Dante quickly ushered Maddie into the hallway and proceeded to help her out of her wet gloves and coat. She blinked up at him with long, spiky lashes as he gently removed her hat and passed it off to the butler. Her teeth chattered, and she shook violently from the cold.

“Goodness me.” His mother hastened into the hallway. “I feared you became caught in the storm.” She glanced at Maddie and gave Dante the briefest curious look. “You are so pale, my dear. We must get you warm.” She gestured to the butler. “Find the housekeeper. Have a bath drawn and find some warm garments for Mrs. Seymour.”

“I-I’m so sorry for any inconvenience I might cause, my lady.”

“Keep her warm, for goodness’ sake, son.” His mother practically thrust them together. “Go and sit by the fire in the drawing room and I’ll make certain that bath is poured with haste.”

Dante led Maddie into the drawing room, the only sound the soft crackling of the fire. Warmth seeped into his bones, thawing him from the inside out. He turned to Maddie, watching as she rubbed her hands together.

“Here.” He held out his hands, hoping that his warmth would be enough to chase away the cold.

Maddie hesitated for a moment before finally taking his hands. A jolt of sensation shot through him, and he almost laughed at himself. There was no doubt in his mind that his feelings toward Maddie would never diminish and that a mere touch of a hand would always set such sensations burning within him.

He couldn’t help but think that this was all he needed in life, to have Maddie’s hands in his forever.

They sat there in silence, watching the flames dance and flicker, until the butler arrived to let them know that the bath was ready. Dante rose and motioned for her to follow him upstairs to one of the guest rooms.

The bath was already steaming, and a set of clean, warm clothes waited for Maddie to change into. A sweet floral scent filled the air, at odds with the blistering storm hammering the windows.

“You need to get warm too,” she said, looking up at him with wide eyes.

He exhaled slowly. He was trying damned hard to play the gentleman, but she was making it difficult. Didn’t she realize what the sight of her all soaked with her dress clinging to her curves did to him? How could he possibly be a true gentleman when all he wanted was to pull her close and warm her up with the heat of his body?

“I will be fine,” he replied, his voice coming out in a low growl. “It’s you who needs to get warm.”

Maddie nodded and stepped across the threshold, closing the door, her gaze locked onto his until the last moment. He waited there, his chest tight, a hand to the door as though he could sense her through the very wood. Jaw tight, he pictured her removing her clothes, revealing her pale skin and slipping into the luxurious water.

Damn it, what was he doing to himself? He was about to move away when the door inched open, revealing Maddie fully clothed and still so pale she was almost gray.

“Maddie?”

“My gown...I can’t...” She motioned with a trembling hand. “The buttons...”

He swallowed. “I’ll fetch a maid.”

“No.”

“Maddie,” he warned.

“I want you to help me,” she said firmly. “Only you.”

She knew what she was asking of him. Knew what she was doing to him. After all, she wasn’t some inexperienced debutante.

And Dante couldn’t refuse her. How could he? He swore he’d loved this woman from the moment he set eyes on her, and he’d do anything for her. Anything at all.

Chapter Seventeen

Dante stepped into the room and kicked the door shut. Maddie shivered, not sure whether it was from the cold or the intensity of his gaze. Dante's eyes were dark and brooding, his expression unreadable. He stepped closer, his breath mingling with hers, and a tremor ran down her spine.

The snowstorm had left his shirt soaked, making it cling to his body, revealing the lines of his muscles and the full breadth of his shoulders.

She was frozen, yes. But there was no denying the heat bubbling up inside her. She hadn't asked for this, hadn't even wanted it. Yet she could not run from it any more than she could run from the snowstorm.

He took her hand and drew her over to the copper tub placed in front of a roaring fire crackling with red and orange flames and molten embers. Spirals of steam rose from the water into the air, carrying the familiar scents of lavender and eucalyptus.

It looked like heaven.

But so did he.

Dante's hair was damp and wild, unkempt around his face, softening the lines of his face. The bath water could be freezing cold for all she cared, and she would probably still follow him into it.

"Come here," he whispered.

Of course, she could justify it. Say that they had no choice. They needed to remove their wet clothes and get warm as swiftly as possible.

But what was the point? She'd spent so long denying what was occurring between them, she didn't want to lie to herself. There were other options. She just didn't want to take them.

She let him pull her close and slip his hands around her back to find the tiny buttons of her gown. His fingers worked efficiently, and she remained quiet, allowing herself to absorb the sensation of his body so scandalously close to hers, and noticed the way his gaze flicked over her face and met hers. She trembled at the feel of his breath dancing so close to her lips.

When he tugged her dress down to the floor and rose, her breath stilted in her lungs. Heated desire burned in his expression, and she couldn't remember ever feeling cold.

"Sweet Jesus," he whispered.

Before she knew what was happening, Dante's lips were on hers, his hands roaming over her body. It was as though he had cracked in two, and all the pent-up desire they'd been suppressing exploded between them.

They stumbled backward, Dante pushing her up against the wall. The mirror on the wall rattled. Her heart hammered in her chest as he kissed her fiercely, his tongue probing deep into her mouth. She moaned softly against his lips, her hands tangling in his hair as he pressed his body fully against hers.

She wrapped one leg around Dante's waist, pulling him closer as their lips met in a fiery kiss. He slid his hands down her body, cupping her breasts while she arched her back, lost in the sensations that were flooding through her. His cock pressed fiercely against her, and she cried out.

Maddie's body was on fire, every inch of her skin tingling with the energy that seemed to flow between them. She roamed her hands over Dante's wet chest, feeling the hard contours of his muscles beneath his shirt. He bit down on her lower lip, causing her to gasp, the sensation sending a jolt of pleasure straight to her core.

His hands slipped between the wall and her stays, his fingers battling the laces until she was released, and she took a long, deep breath. He aided her with her chemise and tossed it to the floor.

Never before had she felt so free. She wasn't a sister or a widow or a daughter right now, but simply—

"Maddie."

Her name on his lips made her stomach dance.

"I've wanted this for too damned long."

She nodded, not trusting herself to respond.

With a growl, Dante lifted her up and carried her toward the bath. He lowered her down into the steaming water and she closed her eyes only briefly as the water closed in over her body, not willing to miss out on him stripping off his shirt and the rest of his clothes.

Her mouth dried. He was spectacular. Muscles and a dusting of hair teased her gaze low.

Dante stepped into the water and sank down in front of her. "I never

expected this,” he admitted. “I never expected you.”

“Neither did I.”

“From the moment I first saw you—”

“I know.”

It was madness, yet it all made sense. He was kind and patient, and he made her smile. He was beautiful and courageous. How could she not want him?

Dante’s hands slid over her hips and down to slip between her thighs. He shifted forward and his lips descended on her neck, and she moaned as she let her head roll back against the rim of the tub. She watched as he carefully moved downward to kiss her nipple. The tiny bud hardened between his lips as he suckled and she gasped, arching her back, offering herself up to him.

“I want you,” he whispered against her ear. “I’ve wanted you for too long.”

His mouth continued its dance across her skin while the fire roared and the water lapped. His fingers skimmed her sensitive flesh, exploring her in gentle circles. She turned her head to spy herself in the mirror on the wall, a blur of candlelight and naked skin.

This was really happening.

The tension in her body coiled tighter with each touch and she trembled under his sensual onslaught. She reached out to run her hands through his hair as Dante’s lips moved lower and he pressed his hands under her rear to lift her high enough out of the water.

A moan escaped her throat when he began to tease her with his tongue. Maddie gripped the side of the bath as pleasure overwhelmed her senses and a wave of pure ecstasy spread through her veins.

“Dante, my God.”

“Yes,” he urged while she rocked into his intimate kisses. “That’s it, Maddie. You taste so good.”

The intensity was too much, but she didn’t want to stop. She wanted more and she gripped his hair as he licked and kissed, until her body was trembling so violently, it felt as if she could take no more.

But she was aching for him, aching to be filled by him. When he slipped his fingers inside her, she cried out in ecstasy. His mouth remained firm and unrelenting against her and, while he stroked her rough and deep and teased her flesh with his mouth, she came apart.

“Yes,” she moaned, eyes scrunched firmly shut, as Dante pushed her over the edge, her orgasm exploding between them. He continued to lap at her

sensitive skin until she was thrashing against him and then he pulled away and she let out a breathy sigh.

As the last of the pleasure ebbed away, she sagged into the water, and he released his grip on her body while she fought to catch her breath. She hadn't expected that. She hadn't expected any of this.

She'd never regret it, though. They still didn't know much about one another, but she knew she wouldn't feel such things with just anyone.

"Are you warm now?" he whispered.

Maddie whimpered softly at the sensation of his cock pressing against her leg, teasing her, tormenting her with want. She was desperate to feel him inside her, to forget the world and be swept away by the heat of his body. She wrapped her arms around his neck, urging him forward until he was nestled between her thighs. He closed his eyes as she wrapped her legs around his waist.

"I need..."

His gaze skimmed hers, a slight smile twitching on his lips. "What do you need, Maddie?"

"So much," she said on a sigh. It might as well have been years of desiring him rather than weeks. "I have a desire to do everything possible all in one night."

Dante chuckled. "We have time."

Maddie searched his sincere gaze and some of the desperation trapped in her chest eased. They had time. More time. It was no promise, but it was enough. She had little desire to think of the future right now. The present was far too tantalizing.

Shifting forward so that his weight rested slightly upon her, he slid his hands down, his fists pressing either side of her bottom. Then he rocked, his arousal sliding against her slickness. She spread her legs as wide as she could and gripped his neck.

He moved again, the water sloshing over the side of the tub. Frissons stirred inside her again. She swore she would never be sated, no matter how many times he wrung pleasure from her. The unerring belief she would desire this man for the rest of her days had lodged firmly inside her, perhaps from the first moment she saw him.

He rocked and rocked, each time teasing her with what she desired most yet not giving in.

"Dante," she protested.

“Not yet,” he said, placating her with a deep kiss. “Not yet.”

“You are determined to drive me to madness,” she concluded breathlessly.

“You have already driven me to madness. It’s only fair.”

She curled her hands into his shoulder and let him play his games, bringing her close to the peak yet again. She gasped and pressed her head into the crook of his neck as she moved her hand between them, managing to curl a hand around his hard cock before he lunged again.

He uttered a rough curse and she smiled against his skin. Moving more boldly, she cherished the feel of his pulsing cock, so steely and warm, and she pictured him thrusting deep into her.

“Maddie...” She lifted her head to see the tendons in his neck and the almost pained expression on his face. “No more,” he said softly. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

“The little death. That’s what the French call it. It was rather intended.”

“I should rather experience it with you than alone.”

She swallowed at the promise behind his eyes. Then he moved, leaving her feeling cold for but a moment, before he settled behind her, guiding her closer to him so that she could feel his arousal pressing against her backside. Maddie felt a sense of liberation as the water enveloped her and she sank against the strength of his body.

A thrill ran through her body as Dante’s hands roamed up and down her curves, exploring every inch of skin with a touch that both excited and comforted her.

He cupped her breasts, teasing each tight nipple until she was arching against him in pleasure.

The world outside the bath ceased to exist and she was lost to the sensations of him kissing her shoulder, then the side of her neck whilst he slid his hand down past her hip and between her thighs, sending a current of pleasure through her. He stroked her in a rhythm that matched his mouth, unhurried and seductive.

“Dante,” she cried out softly as his cock pressed against her back.

“Soon,” he promised.

“I want you now,” she pleaded. “I’ve waited so long for something like this.”

“Then I’ll be gentle.”

“I don’t want gentle,” she said in a breathless whisper. “I’ve waited too long, and I want you to take me. Now.”

His chuckle turned to a groan and Maddie felt his grip tighten against her thighs. She squirmed against him, and she knew she was wet and slippery, but he held her firm.

“How do you want it?” he asked.

There were so many ways. Countless ways. It was too hard to pick one. All she knew was she needed him inside her. Now.

Maddie rose from the water and moved onto her knees, shifting forward so she could curl her hands over the other end of the bath.

“Like this,” she said, glancing over her shoulder.

She saw his expression falter for the briefest moment before he was on her.

She shifted back until she felt him rocking against her. Her muscles clenched tightly, aching for what he could give her, yet she tried to focus on other things. The sloshing water. The cool air on her back.

His fingers tangled in her hair, and he pulled her head back until she could see his eyes burning with desire. Then he kissed her, sliding his tongue into her mouth, mimicking the union of their bodies.

The tip of his cock nudged her entrance and she thrust back against him, inviting him in. His hips bucked once and then he was thrusting, filling her with him, and she cried out.

“Sweet Jesus.”

They moved together, the water washing in waves about them. He thrust hard and shifted, changing the angle, pounding harder still, and the pleasure grew in intensity.

I don’t deserve you,” he said against her back as he scattered kisses over her skin. “Don’t deserve your generosity.”

“Please,” she whimpered. “More.” She moved back against him, and he grasped her hips, pushing forward.

“Your body is made for me,” he whispered fiercely. “I knew I would fit inside you.”

He shifted again and she moaned at the movement. “Yes,” she murmured, as he thrust a little deeper. “Yes, you do.”

“You make me so hard...” he said, rocking into her again.

The water splashed around her waist as he moved faster. She turned her gaze to the side, her eyes meeting his in the mirror. He was watching her. Watching them. Watching a reflection of their joining, something so beautiful and erotic she almost unraveled. He pounded into her, once, twice, a third time, and it happened. It tore through her with such force she had to grip onto

the bath for dear life.

He thrust once more and she moaned at the feel of his cock swelling within her while pleasure ebbed and flowed through her, leaving her feeling hazy. She felt him shudder as he reached his peak and he sank against her, his forehead resting against her shoulder.

“Maddie, that was...”

She simply nodded as he trailed off. There was no coming back from that, not for either of them. Whatever the future held for them, it wasn't going to end here.

Chapter Eighteen

“This snow is a fright.” Dante’s mother pressed away from the windowsill and pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders. “We’ll all be apart for Christmas at this rate.”

“You should have remained in Bath,” he said, lingering in the doorway to the room that his mother had taken over with several easels.

Old sheets yellow with age were draped over tabletops and equally old pots of paint sat in clusters, arranged in a way that his mother would claim made complete sense. It was hard to recall that she was raised as the daughter of a duke at times. No wonder she’d gone against her family and married his father.

And now he would be following in her footsteps. However she felt about Dante going against her request, she certainly couldn’t complain.

“Come in. You won’t interrupt my artistic flow.” She made a sour face and unwound what had come to be called her *creative scarf* from her hair to sling it over the back of a chair. “I cannot feel at all artistic surrounded by so much white. I loathe snow.”

“I always rather enjoyed it.” Even after fretting about Maddie whilst wading their way through the bitter storm, he could not find himself hating it as his mother did.

Especially when it had led to having Maddie in his arms. His attempts at being a gentleman had been thwarted but he’d be damned if he could bring himself to regret it. Being with Maddie simply affirmed what he already knew—he loved her, and he had to marry her, regardless of the consequences.

Dante couldn’t help but smile as he recalled the warmth of Maddie’s body against his. He had never felt such passion before, and he knew he would stop at nothing to make her his. The thought of being apart from her at Christmas was unbearable.

He shook himself out of his thoughts and stepped into the room. “What are

you working on?" he asked, peering at the canvas on the easel.

"It's meant to be a portrait of a snow queen," she said, gesturing to the indistinct shapes on the canvas. "But I can't seem to get it right."

Dante studied the painting. The colors were muted, and the lines blurred, giving the impression of a figure shrouded in mist. "It's beautiful," he said. "But I don't think it looks like a snow queen."

His mother snorted. "Of course not. I hate snow so why did I think I could paint it?" She looked away from her painting, her gaze sharp as she studied him. "You seem preoccupied, dear. Is something troubling you?"

Dante hesitated for a moment. It was best to get it over and done with. "I've made a decision, Mother. I'm going to ask Maddie to marry me." He braced himself for her reaction.

A slow smile curved her lips. "But of course."

Brows raised, he peered at her. "But of course?"

"I knew as soon as I met her."

"Knew what?"

She gave a little shrug. "That you had fallen for her."

"But how could you?" He opened his mouth and shut it. "I scarcely knew."

Or at the very least, he'd been unwilling to admit it.

"You are my only son, my dear, and I know you better than you know yourself. You have been so busy running that I figured if you remained in one spot for a while, something would change. But this..." She gave a light laugh. "You falling in love is more than I could have hoped for."

"You wanted me to marry Phoebe," he reminded her.

"She's a rather spirited girl. I thought she might do you some good, but Maddie—yes I can see you two together. She's a good girl but she has the heart of an adventurer, and nothing is more important to her than family. Just like you."

"So you are not disappointed?"

"Darling, if you are happy, how could I possibly be?"

"This might cause more scandal, the supposed transfer of my affections from one sister to the other."

"If I was afraid of scandal, I would never have married your father."

Dante nodded. He knew she wouldn't be concerned, not really.

"And you do not need to be afraid of it either," she said softly.

"If I was afraid of scandal, do you think I would have behaved the way I did in my youth?"

“I think you secured yourself a reputation and did not know how else to continue. It is far easier to remain at the bottom than climb up and risk a fall is it not?”

He eyed her for a few moments and wished she wasn't so dratted intuitive.

“So when will you propose?”

“I need to speak with Phoebe first. Then Mr. Bloomsbury. Phoebe is quite content to remain unwed according to Maddie. Whether her father feels the same is another thing.”

“A daughter married to the son of an earl should certainly help matters regardless, even if it does not save Phoebe's reputation entirely.”

“I doubt being married to a Musgrave will help the situation much, even out here.”

Especially if word from London of his misdeeds finally reached the village. He'd have to ensure he made Maddie and Phoebe aware of the mistruths circulating.

“But you love her, don't you?” his mother asked, her voice gentle.

Dante nodded solemnly. “More than I ever thought possible.”

“Then that is all that matters.”

He took a deep breath, feeling the weight of responsibility heavy on his shoulders. “I know. I just hope I can make her happy.”

“You will, my dear. You have a good heart, even if you sometimes make poor choices.”

He smiled wryly. “Thank you for the vote of confidence.”

“One always has to have faith in one's children,” she said, patting his hand. “Now, let me return to my painting. I have a feeling a portrait of Maddie will look much better than this snow queen.”

“I shall leave you to it. I'm going to head out so long as we do not get any more snowfall.”

“To speak with the Bloomsburys?”

He nodded.

“Tell them we'll host a ball before we leave for Bath. That way we can celebrate and show the rest of society here that the Bloomsburys are welcome anywhere.”

“That's a fine idea, Mother.”

If he was going to propose to Maddie, though, he wanted to ensure there were no further issues with Woodward. The man was up to something along with his sister and he didn't want anything ruining their first Christmas as an

engaged couple.

The snow remained a thick blanket on the ground, but it didn't prevent him from riding into the village in good time. He slowed as he approached the haberdashery and smirked to himself. Ribbons probably wouldn't make up for wishing to marry her sister instead, but if what Maddie said was correct, Phoebe wouldn't be exactly heartbroken.

It wouldn't hurt to play the doting brother-in-law, though. He always rather enjoyed spoiling his sisters and he suspected Phoebe wouldn't mind being spoiled either.

If only there was something he could give Maddie too. Unfortunately there was no bookshop here, and nothing in the village store tempted him. He'd have to see if he could get something posted from London. That book she'd been hoping for perhaps.

As he stepped out of the building, he paused on the doorstep. Woodward ducked out of the inn, followed by his sister. He glanced Dante's way and the smug smile that crossed his face as Dante headed over made Dante want to curl a fist.

Dante gave him a curt nod. "Woodward."

"Lord Southwick."

Miss Sophie dipped demurely as though she hadn't been trying to kiss him only nights ago. She looked up at him from under her lashes and flashed a smile that held a promise of more than kisses.

"Ribbon shopping, my lord?" said Woodward. "You didn't strike me as the ribbon sort."

"They're for Phoebe." Dante bunched the paper parcel in his hand.

He'd rather hoped to speak to Woodward alone and most certainly not in the village street. The last thing Dante needed to do was create more scandal by threatening Woodward in public.

But he needed him gone. The man and his sister were up to something more than trying to make amends. Dante knew it deep in his gut. Miss Sophie's actions the other night only sealed that suspicion. Hell, if it wasn't for the fact nothing had occurred since he'd been sent sprawling from his horse, he'd suspect they were behind the trip rope.

Woodward raised a brow. "Ah, for Phoebe. That's very kind of you, my lord. They need all the help they can get at present."

He almost didn't bite. Every word out of the man's mouth was a manipulation, of that Dante was certain.

“What do you mean by that?” He couldn’t prevent himself from asking, though.

“My sister tells me Mr. Bloomsbury has lost a rather lucrative client. Quite a blow to the family I think.”

“Quite a blow,” Miss Sophie repeated. “Apparently they do not wish to do business with people of such ill morals.”

Jaw clenched, Dante fought back the urge to grab Woodward by the collar. “And whose fault is that?”

“It was a damned mistake,” the man snapped.

Dante frowned. The words seemed like the first truth he’d ever heard the man utter. In which case, what the devil had he been hoping to achieve by ruining Phoebe?

“The poor family.” Miss Sophie twined her hands in front of her. “If Miss Phoebe is not rescued soon, Mr. Bloomsbury shall surely lose all his income. I imagine you shall want to rush to her side and assure her all will be well.” Her smile grew wicked.

A sickening sensation stirred in his gut. Whatever was going on, he needed to get to Maddie.

“Well, we shall leave you to it. Do send them our best.” She went to loop her arm through her brother’s, but Dante shot a hand out and grabbed Woodward’s arm.

“We need to talk,” Dante hissed.

“Oh, Lord Southwick. What business could you possibly have with my dear brother?”

Dante flung her a warning look before turning back to Woodward. “I believe we have unfinished business, Woodward. And I would like to settle it.”

“And what might that be?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. I want you and your sister to leave this village and never come back.”

Miss Sophie’s eyes widened in surprise, but Woodward just laughed. “Is that so? And what makes you think I’ll do that?”

Dante stepped closer, his voice low and dangerous. “Because I’m the son of an earl, Woodward, and you seem to have forgotten who you are meddling with. These village folk might be inclined to believe your lies, but they will still take my word over yours.” He looked at Miss Sophie. “I’ll make sure they know about your sister’s scandalous behavior the other night.” He

smirked. “We were alone in the gardens for enough time for it to be of consequence. Especially considering she was alone with someone like me.”

Woodward’s expression turned icy. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Dante stared him down. “Try me.”

“I haven’t done anything wrong,” protested Miss Sophie.

“Neither did Phoebe,” Dante countered.

There was a tense moment of silence before Woodward finally spoke. “Fine. We’ll leave. But mark my words, Lord Southwick, you haven’t seen the last of us.”

Dante released his grip on Woodward’s arm and stepped back, watching as the two of them walked away, heads held high but their paces brisk. He breathed a sigh of relief and turned to head toward Maddie’s house.

Now that those two were dealt with, whatever the trouble was with Mr. Bloomsbury, Dante did not doubt he could find a solution so the family could be saved.

And he and Maddie could be together. Finally.

Chapter Nineteen

The front door opened, and Maddie's heart sank to her toes as she shoved the last hatpin into her hat. Usually, she'd be pleased to see her mother but not today.

And not after the news they'd just received.

She hastened forward and took her mother's coat. "How on earth did you get through the snow, Mama?"

Her mother gave her a strained smile. "A mother does what one must when her daughters are in need."

"We are just fine," Maddie assured her.

"Yet I received no word that Phoebe is wed. I'm assuming that is still the case." She peered at Maddie's hat. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Not anymore, Mama."

Maddie glanced her mother over, noting the shadows ringing her eyes and the strain revealing itself in the lines around her mouth. She imagined carriages were able to make it through the snow now but the journey from the coast would have been long and arduous.

"Come and sit down, Mama. You look in need of a hot drink."

"I could do with something stronger if it is true that this situation is still not resolved."

Maddie swallowed. Imagining a future with Dante when she was wrapped in his arms was easy. Telling her family about it was another matter. Especially now.

She settled her mother in the drawing room near the fire and headed down to the kitchen to request tea be brought up.

"Are you hiding?" she asked Phoebe when she spotted her sister sitting at the kitchen table, her hands curled around a steaming cup of tea.

"No."

"You are hiding."

"Do you blame me?" Phoebe's gaze shimmered with unspent tears. "I saw

Mama arrive.”

“She’s worried about you.”

“She will be even more worried when Papa tells her about this cancelled contract.” Phoebe pressed her lips together. “You know it was a huge deal and more clients will follow suit.”

The knot in Maddie’s throat tightened and she fought the need to pull at her fichu. Things were indeed getting worse for her family. News of Phoebe’s ruination and her unwed status was spreading beyond the village.

“I know,” Maddie whispered.

“Perhaps...” Phoebe offered a trembling smile. “Perhaps you marrying Dante will be enough. Perhaps Mama will be satisfied, and the gossip shall cease.”

“Perhaps.”

Though the sickening sensation growing in her stomach told her otherwise. To wed the son of an earl was no trifling matter. However, everyone in the village knew he was intended for Phoebe. If Dante announced the apparent transference of his affections from one sister to the other, it wouldn’t look any less scandalous, even with the power of his title.

Maddie knew what she had to do. She just wasn’t certain she had the strength in her to do it.

She made her way back to the drawing room and found her mother staring intently into the flames. Her father lingered by the window, staring out at the snow with his hands clasped behind his back.

One look at her mother told Maddie that he had apprised her of the situation. “Mama,” she said softly, trying to catch her attention. When her mother turned to face her, Maddie saw the worry etched on her face. “Please don’t be angry with Phoebe. It’s not her fault.”

Her mother let out a deep sigh. “I know it’s not her fault. But society can be unforgiving. And we clearly can’t afford this kind of scandal.”

“We certainly can’t afford this loss of business,” her father muttered.

“You’ve been too soft on her, Bernard,” her mother scolded. “You wanted Phoebe to make this decision herself and that was a mistake.”

Papa turned. “I wasn’t going to force another daughter down the aisle,” he said firmly. “Maddie did that once already.”

“And she is safe and secure for it,” Maddie’s mother shot back.

Maddie closed her eyes. It was true. She would always have a roof over her head and enough money to ensure she never starved. Phoebe and her

mother would not have the same opportunity should anything happen to her father and, if business declined, the situation would be even more tenuous.

“I will speak with this Lord Southwick.” Her mother rose unsteadily from the chair. “He needs to make good on these promises of his.”

Maddie motioned for her mother to remain seated. “You’ve had a long journey, Mama. You need to rest.” She inhaled deeply. “I shall speak with Lord Southwick and make this situation...right.”

“Perfect timing,” her father muttered, peering out of the window. “Here he is now.”

“Stay, Mama,” Maddie ordered before her mother could rise again.

The last thing she wanted was for Dante to receive a scolding from her mother. He’d done nothing but try to help their family and though he admitted marrying Phoebe would help him with his reputation, he could have chosen any young woman. Instead, he’d opted to help someone suffering ruination through no fault of her own.

He was a good man.

That was why she knew he’d accept what she had to say.

No matter how much she did not wish to say it.

She hastened out of the front door and rushed down the path to meet him as he closed the front gate behind him.

His broad grin made her heart almost shatter in two.

“Maddie.”

Her heart gave a painful throb. God, she loved hearing her name on his lips.

“Dante, I—”

His smile dropped. “What’s happened? Is it your father? I—” He waved a hand. “Never mind, tell me what’s wrong.”

“Come with me,” she said, taking his arm. The last thing she wanted was her father and probably now her mother watching them. “I was about to call at the house for you.”

The words came out quickly, as though she could somehow hide all the emotion that seemed to flood her whenever she saw him. From his expression, she had not done a good enough job of hiding it, however.

She led him into the rear of the garden and stilled when he stopped in the middle of the path.

“Maddie, what’s going on?” His chest rose and fell as he took a great breath and stepped toward her. Snow drifted lazily down from the thick

clouds, leaving a light dusting on his lashes and hair. His gaze searched hers and it made her heart ache—especially now she knew what she must say.

“It’s snowing,” she said feebly, and motioned to the small wooden structure at the end of the garden that was usually covered in flowers during the summer but looked a little sad and barren at present with two stone benches tucked into the shadows.

It was a perfect place to say what she needed to say, however. The last thing she needed was roaring fires or lit candles or the fragrances of oranges and pine to give her hope.

Sitting on one of the benches, she frowned as the brim of her hat obscured her view of him, so she carefully tugged it off and put it beside her, each movement feeling so slow and alien, as if she was not in control of her body somewhere. She couldn’t quite believe what she was going to have to say.

He ducked into the shelter but remained standing, his posture tense. He turned to peer out at the garden. Her heart ached when she imagined what he had come here to say. Her eyes stung if she thought too much about the hopefulness she’d spied behind his smile. Maddie knew it all too well, as she had awoken with that same sensation.

But things had changed. The situation had grown worse. Her family needed her.

Silence grew crushing but the words would not come from her mouth. It was simple enough. All she needed to do was remind him he originally came here for her sister. She’d emphasize the need for them to marry quickly and tell him that her sister would likely accept now.

All would be well. All would be as it should be. She curled her hands into her lap while the ache in her chest increased. She swallowed hard and frowned at herself when she felt heat building in her eyes.

She’d had her chance at security. Now it was Phoebe’s turn. Dante could be a good husband to her, Maddie was certain of that. How selfish she was to want him all for herself.

He turned to look at her. “Maddie, I—”

“Phoebe will be amenable now I think,” she spilled out. “That is to say, she will accept. I am certain of it.”

He opened his mouth and shut it. Maddie cast her gaze down. It hurt too much to look at him. Every time she did, she could think of nothing other than how his lips and hands felt upon her body. How beautiful and sensual and...and *whole* he made her feel.

His throat bobbed. “But yesterday—”

“Was a wonderful dream.” Maddie said softly. “But it was only that. A dream. A foolish hope. And it can never be anything more.”

Dante’s eyes narrowed as he took a step closer. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I’ve come to a decision,” she said, forcing herself to meet his gaze. “I won’t stand in the way of Phoebe’s happiness. I won’t let my own selfish desires ruin her future.”

His expression was unreadable. “And what of your future, Maddie?”

“My future,” she echoed, “is not important. What’s important is that our family stays afloat. And if marriage to Phoebe is what it takes to secure their future, then so be it.”

“Dammit, Maddie.” He removed his hat and pushed a hand through his damp hair, making it curl a little. “You know I do not want to marry your sister.”

“You came here to marry her,” she reminded him.

“I came here for your sister, yes.” His gaze bore into hers, dark and breathtaking. “But I want you.”

She shook her head frantically. “No, no you cannot.”

“I can, and I do. I want you, Maddie.” He took a step toward her.

Standing as he came closer, she moved back and held up her palms like some kind of useless shield against all the emotion he created within her. “Look, Dante, I do not know what this is...” She motioned between them.

“Of course you do.”

“But it is over. It has to be.” She lifted her chin and hauled in a painful breath. “My sister needs you. My family needs you. My mother needs you. We have no other choice.” She fought to draw in painful breaths to keep her emotions at bay. “My father’s business is now affected by this, and I cannot look after them...”

“I can,” he said swiftly. “I’ll give them money, I’ll—”

“You’ll take away their pride and dignity of which they do not have much left. You’ll take away their friends, their life here. No amount of money can fix what has happened. If Phoebe is not wed as soon as possible, they’ll be obliged to leave. Go somewhere where no one knows them. My father shall be forced to start his business again.”

“I do not want them having to run,” he muttered.

“So you see what you must do.” Maddie touched his arm gingerly.

“I didn’t choose to feel this way, Maddie.”

She glanced away, a slightly hysterical laugh escaping her. “My *sister* didn’t have a choice. If you do not marry her, she shall suffer for the rest of her days. All because some bastard decided to—”

Dante grabbed her arm, forcing her to look at him. “I love you, Maddie. I want to marry you.”

Her heart sank down into her toes. He could have made it easier for her. “Damn you, Dante.” She wrenched her arm from him.

“Damn me?”

“Yes, damn you. Damn you for saying such things.” She picked up her hat and thrust it onto her head, tying it in jerky movements. Her limbs felt simultaneously warm and awkward, as though she had forgotten how to use them.

Snatching up the hat pins, she thrust them into her pelisse pocket, only for one to jab her finger. She hissed and went to put it to her mouth, but Dante took her hand and inspected it. As he brought it up to his mouth, Maddie found herself captive. She watched, open-mouthed as he brought the injured finger up to his mouth and sucked away the pain, enveloping it in a delicious warmth that had her legs turning to mush.

His gaze was knowing, his expression almost smug. She yanked her hand away and wrapped her arms about herself. “Marry Phoebe. Please,” she begged. “She needs you.”

“What about what I need? What you need?” he asked, his expression pained.

“It does not matter.” She shrugged. “You are the son of an earl. You are used to doing your duty.” Sighing, she moved toward the doorway. “If you truly love me, Dante, please marry my sister.”

All fight seemed to leave him then. His shoulders sagged a little and the determination in his eyes faded. She knew then that he would do it. Even if he loved her. Even if he knew she loved him. He would marry her sister, and all would be well once more.

Chapter Twenty

Phoebe smiled at Dante. He suspected only he spied the little tremor on her lips as they finished the set. He dipped to Phoebe and led her from the dance floor. She looked beautiful in cream silk. There was no denying she would make an excellent countess.

And despite her rather amusing moments of rebellion, she was well-mannered in company, and it was clear his mother found her charming. He swung a glance to the side where his mother sat with some of the other older ladies in attendance. She eyed him with a tenuous look.

“I have a few more dances promised,” he told Phoebe, “but may I claim the last?”

Her smile wavered further. She glanced down before meeting his gaze. “Yes, of course.”

He tried to crush the ache in his chest. If he stood up with her again, it would be assumed they were engaged. He would not even need to announce it—though he would. And that would be that. They would have a quick wedding and he would take her as his wife. He glanced around the room, looking for the lady to whom he had promised the next dance.

His gaze landed on Maddie. No matter how hard he tried to avoid her, he could not help skimming his gaze up and down her person and recalling the feel of that curvy body pressed against his. He’d been dancing all damned night, but he’d not managed to claim a single dance with her.

And nor should he. It was clear that he could not control himself when it came to Maddie.

The empty ache inside increased when she turned briefly, met his gaze, then quickly swiveled her head away. The hurt was there, clear as day. She loved him too, he was certain of that. But she loved her sister more and wanted to protect her. For Maddie’s sake, and for no one else’s, he would rescue Phoebe and ensure she was safe from all scandal and gossip.

Hell, he’d become the best husband a man could be, but only for Maddie.

Any idea of setting Phoebe up in a house somewhere and going back to his debaucherous lifestyle had well and truly vanished. For once in his life, he was going to do the right thing.

Beside him, Phoebe stiffened. He gave up searching for the next lady and looked at his fiancé-to-be. Her cheeks had grown blotchy and she gripped the dance card on her wrist until her knuckles whitened.

“What’s that matter, Phoebe?” he murmured.

Her gaze swung to his, creases between her brows. “It’s him,” she muttered so quietly that he had to lean in to hear her. “I thought he’d left.”

“Him?” Dante followed her gaze and saw Woodward and his sister weaving their way through the crowds.

He issued a harsh breath. Woodward had some gall coming to his mother’s ball after Dante’s threats. Either the man was stupid indeed or wanted something. Dante would wager on both. Greedy men were seldom clever, and he suspected it wasn’t enough for Woodward to have taken Phoebe’s reputation. He wanted something more.

Phoebe narrowed her gaze at Woodward. “I have no idea why he has not left. I do not believe for one second he really wants to make amends.”

“Neither do I. The man’s an utter blaggard.”

She glanced up at him, a slight smile upon her lips. “At least we know we have one thing in common there. We both loathe the man.”

“I told him to go away and never return. Apparently the man doesn’t listen.”

Her brows lifted. “I’m impressed.”

“It would be more impressive if the man actually left,” Dante grumbled.

Phoebe sighed. “I know this situation is not ideal and we haven’t even discussed the fact you are in love with—”

“Not here, Phoebe,” Dante warned.

There were too many ears listening and too many eyes upon them. Besides, the last thing either of them needed to discuss was Maddie, who was currently in the arms of an older gentleman and had been avoiding him all night.

She wasn’t wrong to. There was nothing that could be gained by being around one another.

“Well, my point is, my lord,” Phoebe continued, “this isn’t really what either of us wanted but you should know that I shall not stand in your way should you wish to discretely—”

He held up a finger. “Do not even say it, Phoebe. You deserve better than that. Maddie deserves better than that.”

She stared at him for several moments then nodded. “I can see why she loves you.”

There were times when Dante hadn’t felt loveable at all. Oh yes, his sisters doted on him, and his parents gave him everything he ever needed. Despite his father’s humble beginnings, being the youngest Musgrave meant he’d never experienced any hardship. He’d been spoiled to be frank, and even flitting about Europe had hardly been a toil.

But he’d messed up. Many a time. He proved himself to be not much better than Woodward, barely thinking of the consequences and he wondered how it was his family could still love him after all he’d done.

Maddie loved him, though. He felt it with utter certainty in his bones. And for her, he would be a better man.

“What does he want now?” Phoebe asked, exasperated as Woodward headed their way, his sister in tow.

Dante stepped slightly in front of Phoebe and lifted his chin as the man approached. “I thought I told you to never show your face here again.”

Woodward glanced about the ballroom and smirked. “And miss out on this fine event. I think not.”

“Woodward—” Dante warned, his tone low. The last thing he wanted to do was ruin his mother’s ball and the event that was meant to announce his engagement to Phoebe.

“I had some interesting news today, did I not, Sophie?”

His sister smiled sweetly.

Phoebe narrowed her gaze at the pair. “I’m not certain we care what your news is.”

“Oh, Miss Phoebe, please listen,” Miss Sophie pleaded softly. “It’s important for you to hear this.”

“Woodward, I do not have the time nor the patience for this—”

“Not concerned about the price on your head then?” The man rocked back on his heels and smirked as Dante stared him down.

“A price on your head?” Phoebe looked at Dante. “Whatever does that mean?”

“Lord Southwick is here to outrun some rather scandalous behavior.” Woodward thrust a thumb in Dante’s direction and lowered his voice. “Got not one but two women in the family way.”

“Like hell I did.”

“Now there’s a father out there willing to pay whoever fights him in a duel,” Miss Sophie said brightly.

Dante straightened his shoulders. “I take it you wish to collect the bounty, Woodward?”

The man shrugged. “It hardly seems a terrible thing to get paid to do the right thing now, does it?”

Phoebe stepped in between Woodward and Dante, her chin lifted. “You wouldn’t know the right thing if it bit you in the rear.”

Someone around them gasped. Maddie pressed through the slowly gathering crowd and emerged at Phoebe’s side. “Whatever is going on?”

“Lord Southwick is not all he appears to be.” Miss Sophie affected a somber expression. “He left two ladies pregnant in London,” she whispered to Maddie.

Maddie’s gaze met his. “Is this true?”

“No, of course not.”

Her throat worked, her brow furrowing. “Someone said there’s a price—”

“On his head.” Woodward nodded eagerly. “Hardly indicative of his innocence is it? I suppose that’s why he wished to marry Phoebe. He hoped it would save his skin if he was a sedate married man.”

He swallowed hard. That bit wasn’t necessarily a lie. “There’s more to it than that, Maddie.”

She eyed the gathering crowd and clasped her sister’s hand.

“We do not need any further scandal,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Let’s go, Phoebe.”

“Maddie, wait—”

Woodward moved in front of him, blocking his path. The people around them prevented him from moving to either side. He hissed out a breath and shoved a hand through his hair.

“Are you happy now, Woodward?”

“Not yet, but I will be.” Raising his voice, Woodward gestured to Dante. “I demand satisfaction for all you have done.”

Dante’s eyes narrowed. “You’ve got a death wish, Woodward.”

“I want a duel,” Woodward said, his chest puffed out. “You and me. Here. Now.”

Dante let out a humorless laugh. “We have no pistols or swords.”

“We use fists then. I won’t take no for an answer,” Woodward said, taking

a step closer to Dante. “Justice must be done.”

Dante balled his hands, feeling the anger rising inside of him. If any man needed justice brought down upon him, it was Woodward. Dante might be no angel, but he had never deliberately hurt anyone. Woodward revealed his true colors tonight and left Dante with no doubt he’d been trying to manipulate Maddie and Phoebe one way or another.

“Fine,” Dante said through a tight jaw. “Tonight. After the ball.” He leaned in. “I’ll welcome the chance to punish you for what you did to Phoebe.”

Dante gave Woodward no chance to argue. He had more important things to worry about than this inflated ego of a man. He needed to find Maddie and explain this nonsense before everything spiraled out of control.

Even further out of control, that was.

Dante forced his way through the attendees, ignoring the whispers and curious glances. He spotted Maddie just as she was about to leave the ballroom, her hand still clasped in Phoebe’s.

“Maddie, wait,” he called out, making his way through the throngs of people.

He caught up with her in the hallway. She turned to face him, and he saw the fear and uncertainty in her eyes. “What is this all about, Dante?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Please, let me explain,” he said, taking her hand in his. “There’s been a terrible mistake. I swear to you, I never—”

But before he could finish his sentence, hurried footsteps drew his attention, and he peered over his shoulder to find his mother hastening toward him.

“Is it true?” she demanded.

“What now?”

“That you’re going to duel that man? At your engagement ball?”

“Well, it’s not an engagement ball yet, my lady,” Phoebe interjected. Maddie grabbed her sister’s arm and dragged her back to her side.

“And nor shall it be.” Maddie lifted her chin. “The whole reason for this was to save Phoebe but I am sorry to say, my lady, it seems to me your son has brought even more of it upon us.”

Easing out a long breath, Dante felt the weight of the situation heavy on his shoulders. This was not how he had wanted things to go. He wanted to protect the sisters, to keep them safe from harm and scandal, but now it seemed he had only made matters worse.

He met Maddie's gaze and fought to find the words to make things right, but it didn't matter. It didn't matter if he hadn't left those women in that state. Didn't matter if the bounty wasn't justified. The fact was he'd been guilty of ensuring his reputation was so terrible that any lie could be believed.

"Do you have anything to say?" she asked huskily..

He shrugged. "Nothing at all."

Disappointment flickered in her gaze. "Come on, Phoebe, let us go."

His mother tapped him on the shoulder as the two ladies hastened away. "You're just letting her go are you?"

He stared at the polished marble floor, not willing to watch Maddie leave for fear he'd follow after her and beg her to stay. "I might not have been behind the scandal in London, but Maddie is right, they don't need me to make things worse."

His mother harrumphed. "And here I thought you had ceased running from your problems for once."

"I *had* to go to Europe. You know that."

"We let you go but you could have stayed and fought. Lord knows, the rest of us did."

"Yes, Mother, I'm a frightful coward," he intoned. "Thank you for that."

"You are far from a coward, my darling." She cupped his face in both hands. "You have always been willing to stand up for those in need and, Lord knows, there would be a lot less gossip about you were you to simply slip away and live a bland life. But when it comes to your feelings, you are not the cleverest of men."

"Oh stupid and cowardly." He shook his head. "Wonderful."

She smiled softly. "Men do tend to be rather stupid when it comes to love. You, my dear, are no different."

"Well, perhaps in all your finite wisdom you can tell me how to fix this damn situation."

His mother shook her head. "This is for you to figure out, but I can tell you one thing for certain—running will not solve things." Her expression grew stern. "And neither will fighting."

"But Woodward—"

"Will leave this ball unsatisfied."

"It will not look good," he warned her.

"And neither will a duel in my gardens!"

Dante sighed. "I know. But I can't just let him get away with what he's

done.”

“You won’t.” His mother’s eyes were steely. “But there are ways to handle this without resorting to violence. You need to think of the consequences, Dante. Not just for yourself, but for those around you.”

He knew she was right. He had to find a way to deal with Woodward without causing a scene. Without causing any more harm to Maddie and her family.

“I’ll figure it out,” he said finally. “I’ll find a way to make things right.”

“Excellent.” She twirled on her heel. “Now it won’t be the first time we Musgraves have had a little drama at a ball, and it will not be the last, but I had better go settle everyone down.”

He nodded, remaining in the hallway. He eyed the open front door.

The temptation to cut his losses and leave, start afresh somewhere else where no one knew his name or his reputation, made his feet twitch. But then again, he couldn’t run away from his problems forever. He had to face them head on and make amends for his mistakes. And ensure Maddie and Phoebe were safe, no matter what.

He heard a footstep behind him and turned. “Mother—”

A flash of movement was followed by a thudding sound. Pain speared through his skull, causing his vision to become hazy. He dropped to his knees from the impact and slowly lifted his head.

Miss Sophie bent down to look at him, her smile as sickly sweet as ever. “We’re going to collect that bounty no matter what,” she told him. “And then my dear man shall have Mrs. Seymour too.”

“Maddie?” he managed to utter before something struck him over the back of his head. He sagged fully to the floor, unable to fight the darkness as it washed over him.

Chapter Twenty-One

The sound of carriage wheels crunching through the snow made Maddie's heart leap. She set aside the book she hadn't even managed to open yet and rose slowly, forcing herself not to dash to the door. She didn't know what she'd say to him yet. All she knew was she needed to see him.

"Dante—" She pulled the door open to find Mr. Woodward standing in the doorway. She peered around him to spy a closed carriage in a discreet black and gray with no crest on the side. Most certainly not Dante's.

"I did not know you had a carriage," she said inanely.

He gave a stiff smile. "May I come in?"

She glanced around the snow-covered garden, the only company a robin hopping from the frozen bird bath to the little bird table her late husband had made that she obediently kept stocked with seeds and berries.

"I'm not certain that's a good idea."

He held up his hands. "I know last night was not ideal and I can only offer my apologies."

She scanned his face, spying no bruises or marks. Did that mean—

"Did you fight?"

"No."

A sigh escaped her. At least Dante was not harmed.

"You must believe me when I say I did not wish to cause a scene like that."

She folded her arms and leaned against the doorway. "I rather think you would have to be a fool not to expect a scene when calling someone out."

"It was important you knew the truth about him."

The trouble was, she almost agreed with him. The rumors could be true or not—and frankly, she did not believe Dante capable of such abominable behavior—but even as he had confessed of his rakish ways, he had never mentioned a price on his head.

"Well, I know the truth now, and so does everyone else. You have achieved whatever it is you set out to achieve, Mr. Woodward, so if you do

not mind—”

She went to shut the door and he slammed a firm hand against it. Eyes wide, she studied the thick leather glove pressing firmly against the door.

“Mr. Woodward—”

“I already told you of my affection for you and that has not changed, Maddie.”

“Mrs. Seymour,” she replied firmly, trying to move the door against his strong hold.

He refused to budge. “I could save you all,” he said. “Us marrying would distract from Phoebe’s situation, and I have money and a fine reputation—”

Maddie felt a slightly hysterical laugh escape her. “Phoebe is in this situation because of you.” She stepped close and jabbed a finger into his chest. “None of this would have occurred were it not for you. If you truly wanted to fix it, you would have proposed to Phoebe, not me, but I am mightily glad you did not for I would have hated to have seen her with such a man who cannot comprehend the harm he has done.”

Mr. Woodward’s face twisted suddenly, his eyes darkening.. “You dare speak to me like that?”

Her throat threatened to close up as she lifted her chin and took an unsteady breath. Here he was, the true Mr. Woodward.

“I dare speak the truth,” Maddie replied, holding his gaze. “And the truth is, I would not marry you if you were the last man on earth. You are a manipulative man who uses people for your own gain and whatever good reputation you believe you have is entirely false.”

“Is this because of Southwick? You really care for such a man?”

“He is ten times the man you are, and he has never tried to be anything he is not. He’s a true gentleman.”

He moved swiftly then, pushing her against the door and pinning her arms above her head. “You will not speak to me in such a manner. You will respect me.”

“Let go of me!” Maddie shouted, struggling against his grip. The wood pressed hard into her back and heat rushed through her as she squirmed.

But he held her firm, his face contorted with rage. “You will marry me, Maddie. One way or another.”

“I told you she wouldn’t accept your proposal.” Miss Sophie stepped around the side of the cottage, her hands tucked into a fur muff. “You’re a bumbling idiot, Martin.”

Maddie peered between Sophie and her brother. She knew there was something odd about the pair.

“Release me,” Maddie said firmly. “Sophie, please tell your brother—”

“Oh this fool isn’t my brother.” She smiled broadly. “We’re...what would you say, Martin? Business companions?”

“More than that sometimes, Sophie, dear,” he said through his teeth.

“Yes, yes.” Sophie rolled her eyes. “Now can we get this done?”

“Done?” Maddie gulped hard and wriggled harder against the hold Mr. Woodward had on her. His grip pinched into her skin, and he dodged her legs as she kicked out.

Sophie sighed, withdrew a pistol from the muff and pointed it at Maddie, forcing her to freeze. Maddie stared down the barrel of the weapon, her stomach dropping to her toes.

“Come peacefully or I’ll shoot you and toss you in the nearest lake.”

The woman said this so saccharinely Maddie struggled to comprehend the viciousness behind the threat. But she found herself being shoved along by Mr. Woodward toward the carriage. He opened the door and nausea burned in the back of her throat when she spotted the body on the floor of the vehicle.

“Dante.” His name bubbled up on a sob. His eyes were closed, his face marred with a deep purple bruise, and his legs and hands were bound.

“Oh don’t be dramatic.” Sophie jabbed her in the back with the pistol. “He’s alive and he’ll stay that way if you cooperate. We just need to get him back to London to collect that bounty, then you can wed Martin and we can finally move on from this wretched place.”

“If you take Dante to London, someone will probably kill him.”

Sophie shrugged. “That’s up to them.” She pressed the gun once more into Maddie’s back. “But he’ll live longer if you behave nicely.”

“Careful, Sophie,” Mr. Woodward warned.

“Do be quiet, Martin. We wouldn’t have wasted so much time here if you’d have kissed the right bloody sister.”

“They’re twins,” he protested. “They look the same.”

“Why do you even want to marry me?” Maddie risked a glance over her shoulder as she climbed into the carriage, carefully stepping around Dante’s prone body. “You cannot marry me by force, surely you know that?”

Mr. Woodward eyed her for a few moments, his hand on the carriage door. “I wouldn’t have been a terrible husband, you know. At least up until I left

you. But I think we might have to opt for something else. A trip to the London bank where your late husband kept his money perhaps.”

Maddie scowled. “My husband had no money.”

“Oh, I assure you, he did,” Mr. Woodward replied with a smirk. “And you’re going to help us get our hands on it.”

Maddie’s heart sank. She was trapped. Trapped with a man who had no qualms about using violence and manipulation to get what he wanted, and a woman who seemed just as vicious. And poor Dante, caught up in their schemes.

Sophie urged her to the carriage door, the hard jab of the gun making Maddie flinch. Mr. Woodward grabbed a rope from inside the vehicle and yanked her wrists together. She didn’t fight him as he tied the knot so tight it bit into her wrists, but she wouldn’t give up. She couldn’t. She had to find a way out of this, for herself and for Dante. She took a deep breath and silently vowed to herself that she would never give in to Mr. Woodward’s demands. She would fight and she would survive for as long as she could.

The door slammed shut and she heard something thud against the door. Maddie dropped onto the seat as the carriage rolled forward. She leaned over and pressed her bound hand over Dante’s cheek, his skin cool and clammy to the touch. The carriage moved off and his body shifted closer with the movement.

“Oh, Dante.”

A spark of hope flared in her chest when she saw his lashes flicker. He groaned, his eyes coming fully open, and she saw the confusion swiftly turn to horror as he spied her bound hands. He struggled to sit up, his hands still bound tightly behind his back.

“Maddie,” he muttered weakly, his voice barely a whisper. “What’s going on?”

She shook her head, her throat tight. “We’ve been kidnapped,” she said softly. “By Mr. Woodward and his accomplice Sophie.”

“Where are they taking us?” He looked her over. “Are you unharmed?”

“To London,” she replied, her voice shaking slightly. “To collect the payment offered for you.”

Dante’s face contorted as he struggled against his bindings. “I’ll kill them both,” he spat. “I swear it.”

Maddie placed her hands on his arm. “Let us untie you first.” She motioned for him to turn his back to her. It took her some time to pull apart

the intricate knot around his wrists, her own restraints chafing against her skin and making it more difficult to aid him. He managed to loosen the rope around his legs with a little more ease and he rose, a hand to the side of the carriage to steady himself. He pulled apart the knots about her wrists and touched the marks left with a look of regret.

“Why the devil did they take you?” He winced when the carriage jolted over a bump. “They’re driving recklessly. We’ll never make London in one piece.”

“They believe I have money. It seems Mr. Woodward’s whole plan revolved around trying to marry me for money.” She shook her head. “Mr. Seymour was no pauper, but he didn’t have any additional money as far as I know.”

“The pair of them are scheming bastards it seems.” Dante paused. “Forgive me.” He bent to peer out of the window. “We need to get you out of here.”

“Sophie has a pistol.”

His face paled. “Did she hurt you?”

“No.” She thought of the bruises on her wrists, but it was nothing compared to what had happened to Dante. “They hurt you, though. He said the two of you didn’t fight.”

“We didn’t. I don’t think he ever intended it to be a fair fight. He distracted me and the pair knocked me out. No one witnessed it, I’d wager.”

“So we’re alone.”

“We can jump.” He put a hand to the door and turned the doorknob, but the door didn’t budge.

“I think it’s barred from the outside,” Maddie said. “I heard them put something against the door.”

He sank down next to her and took her hand in his. Heat flourished through her at the feel of his warm hand wrapped about hers. It filled her with strength, and she knew the two of them would escape this together, no matter what.

“I’m sorry for not telling you about this London business. The truth is, I was hoping Phoebe would keep the wolves at bay, but I let the wolves come here and that was a mistake.”

“The wolf was already here it seems. I wonder when they got wind of this reward. It sounded as though they only intended to use me originally.” Maddie wrinkled her nose. “I don’t think she’s even his sister, you know. At least I certainly hope not.”

“They are a devious pair to be certain and I knew as much. If I had not been so wrapped up in...” He gave a tilted smile. “Well, I should have confronted the pair sooner and ensured they were run out of town for good.”

“You can hardly blame yourself for this.” She gestured about the carriage in which they were trapped.

“But I can. I should have been more vigilant. This never should have happened.” Dante squeezed her hand. “But what’s done is done. We need to focus on getting out of here.”

Maddie nodded. “Agreed. But how?”

Dante stared out of the window, his expression thoughtful. “We need to wait for the right moment. When they least expect it, we make a run for it.”

“But what about the pistol?”

“We’ll have to hope that Sophie is a bad shot.” Dante’s eyes glinted with determination. “We can do this, Maddie. We just need to be patient.”

She nodded, dread settling low in her stomach. Any doubts about Dante were long gone, even before she had seen him knocked senseless on the floor of the carriage. He would do whatever he must to protect her, even go up against a woman with a weapon. But she couldn’t let him get hurt, no matter what.

Somehow, both of them had to come out of this alive.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The carriage jolted to a stop. Dante put out a hand to prevent Maddie from spilling forward. He tensed every muscle when he heard footsteps. As soon as he got the chance, he was getting them out of here.

Who knew what these two would do to Maddie once they reached London and realized she had no fortune to her name. Now they knew the truth of the pair—that they were no more than scheming liars and potentially practiced con artists—he doubted neither he nor Maddie would be left alive.

All that mattered was Maddie.

He gave her hand a quick squeeze. They hadn't discussed any plan of escape over the past several hours. Truth be told, he couldn't figure one out where both of them would make it out alive. The barred door held up against force and the window was too small for even Maddie to squeeze out of if he broke it.

But Dante knew they had to think of something quickly. He peered out the window, trying to get a glimpse of their surroundings. They seemed to be in the middle of nowhere, with nothing but a deserted road and a few trees on either side. The only sign of civilization was a small stone marker though he couldn't make out how far from a town they were.

As the footsteps grew louder, Dante tightened his grip on Maddie's hand. He looked at her, searching her eyes for any sign of fear. But all he saw was determination. She was ready to fight, to do whatever it took to get out of this situation alive.

"Be careful. Please," she urged in a whisper.

The door opened slowly, and Dante readied himself to leap forward. He hesitated when the barrel of a pistol slipped through the gap. The door widened slowly, and Sophie grinned up at him and quickly aimed the weapon at Maddie.

She eyed their unbound hands with a smirk. "Try anything and I'll shoot her." She looked to Maddie. "And if *you* think of trying anything clever, I'll

shoot him. Understand?”

Dante issued a silent curse. The woman was no fool. If it was just him, he might risk rushing her, but with Maddie here, he couldn't put her in danger by acting rashly. And he imagined Maddie felt the same way.

“If you shoot her, you won't get her money.”

“A little injury won't stop her from ensuring we receive what we deserve.”

“I told you,” Maddie said, “I do not have any money.”

“I happen to know there's a nice fat account with the name Seymour on it.” Sophie cocked her head. “Shame your husband never told you about it.”

Maddie shook her head. “You're wrong.”

Sophie shrugged and kept the gun pointed steadily at Maddie. Dante's heart kicked against his ribs. He imagined the deafening ricochet of the bullet, the gasp of pain from Maddie, and blood blossoming through her cream gown. He looked into Sophie's cold eyes and had no doubt the woman would shoot if necessary.

“Martin,” Sophie called. “Hurry up and bring that bloody water bottle.”

Dante caught a brief glimpse of the man looking less than his usual polished self as he handed over a leather bottle. Sophie tossed it to the floor.

“Do have a drink, Maddie. We wouldn't want you falling into a faint now, would we?”

The door slammed shut and Dante heard something thudding into place. He hissed out a breath and retrieved the bottle to hand it to Maddie.

She shook her head.

“You should drink. The journey to London is three days long at least and who knows when we'll get another chance.”

“We'll escape before then.”

The statement held a question in it and Dante knew what she was asking. What was their plan? How were they going to get out of this situation alive? He wished he had an answer for her, but he didn't.

“We'll figure something out,” he said instead, hoping to reassure her.

Maddie nodded, but he could see the fear in her eyes. She was scared, and he didn't blame her. Dante was scared too. For her. But he couldn't let her see it.

He leaned back against the seat and closed his eyes, trying to think of a plan. They needed to get out of the carriage, but how? Sophie would have no compunctions shooting one of them should they try to flee.

He looked at Maddie as she took a long drink of water. All he needed to do

was ensure he was between the gun and Maddie at some point. Sophie would only have one shot before she had to reload and perhaps he could ensure it didn't hit anything vital. The fact Woodward might pursue her was a big concern, though. The man was no fighter, but Maddie had explained how he'd overpowered her once already.

"They'll have to stop to change horses at some point," he said. "We'll have to make our move then."

Quite what that move was yet, he didn't know, but there was only so long he was willing to wait around and at least if they were around people, Maddie could run for help.

They travelled on through the countryside and the night closed in around them. Dante drew the curtains over the windows.

Maddie tilted her head. "But we can't see what they're doing now."

"And they cannot see what we're doing," he pointed out.

He kept her hand clasped in his, the warmth of her fingers tucked between his giving him strength. She rested her head upon his shoulder and his heart ached. How he wished he could have this always.

Not being trapped by two lunatic charlatans of course but he wished to have Maddie by his side always. He pictured them in her sweet cottage, sitting in front of the fire while she had a book in her lap.

They would walk up the hill and take in the view and have picnics on the grass in the summer. Their children would run around The Kymin and pick blackberries from the bushes in Autumn.

He wanted it finally. The staid, dull life of a husband. He craved it with Maddie so much that it was like a stab in the gut.

If there was even a remote chance of that future with her, he'd have to fight for it.

No more running ever again.

After another hour of driving according to his pocket watch, he spied the glimmer of lanterns through the gaps in the curtains.

"Maddie, wake up."

She lifted her head from his shoulder and peered blearily around.

"I think we're going to stop soon."

She straightened and rubbed her eyes. "I'll do whatever I need to do."

"I'm going to assume Sophie will have her gun again."

Face pale in the dim light, Maddie nodded.

"As soon as she opens the door, I'm going to kick it. Hard."

“And knock it into her?”

“That’s the plan.”

“What of Woodward?”

“I’ll take care of him.” He took both her hands in his. “If there’s a chance you can run, you take it, Maddie.”

Her gaze scanned his and she gave a slight nod.

The carriage slowed to a stop, and Dante’s heart raced. He heard the muffled sounds of their captors talking outside.

Sophie’s voice carried through the door. “Hurry up. We don’t have all night.”

Dante took a deep breath and braced himself, ready to kick the door as soon as it opened. The lock turned and the door creaked open slowly.

Dante didn’t hesitate. He kicked the door with all his might, sending it crashing into Sophie. She stumbled backward, the gun flying out of her hand.

Dante leaped from the carriage to spy Sophie sprawled upon the cobbled surface of a courtyard, the pistol resting by a bale of hay and Woodward rushing toward him.

Maddie bolted out of the carriage and rushed for the pistol. Dante cursed under his breath as Woodward used his distraction to duck low and thrust a shoulder into his gut, crashing him into the side of the carriage. Air expelled from his lungs at the impact.

He stumbled back, gasping for breath, and barely managed to dodge Woodward’s next blow. Dante knew he had to act fast before the man overpowered him again.

He feigned left and then swung his right fist at Woodward’s jaw. The man stumbled, but regained his balance quickly and lunged at Dante once more.

Dante tried to dodge again but Woodward was too quick. His shoulder connected with Dante’s chest, knocking him off his feet and sending him crashing into the ground. His head bounced off the cobbles and agony flooded his senses.

The world spun around him. He knew he had to get up, had to protect Maddie. Through the haze, he saw Maddie holding the gun, pointing it at Woodward. He heard her voice, shaking but determined.

“Stay away from him or I’ll shoot.”

Woodward hesitated for a moment, then backed away with his hands raised high.

“Damn it, Martin, she won’t shoot you.” Sophie pressed up from the

ground and swiped her hands down her skirts. “Just grab the girl.”

“You bloody grab the girl,” Woodward retorted. “I’m not risking a bullet hole in this waistcoat.”

“You always were a vain idiot,” she muttered. “I’ll do it myself.”

Maddie turned the gun on Sophie as the woman approached, the weapon trembling in her hand. Dante had no idea if she even knew how to shoot a pistol.

Sophie reached for the gun and Maddie twisted the weapon. She brought the barrel down upon the side of Sophie’s head and the woman’s eyes rolled briefly before she crumpled to the floor.

“That’s for Dante,” Maddie said quietly as she righted the gun and pointed it at Woodward. “And if you’re not careful, Mr. Woodward, I shall take revenge for my sister too.”

“I never wanted to hurt you.” Woodward kept his hands raised as Maddie moved to Dante’s side. “I was just going to take your money.”

“How gentlemanly,” Dante drawled.

“It was her idea to take you.” He jerked his head toward Sophie’s prone body. “We only got word of the bounty, but a day ago and she said we could leave England and never look back with the amount offered.”

“Was there really a bank account under my husband’s name?” Maddie asked.

Woodward nodded eagerly. “Yes, yes. I can even tell you where. Sophie had a list of them. She took them from—” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. But you’ll be a wealthy woman if you just let me—”

“I’m not going to let you do anything,” Maddie said steadily, her grip on the pistol now firm.

Dante didn’t think he’d ever loved her more.

“I was only trying to marry you.” Woodward took a step forward. “If Lord Southwick hadn’t been in the way all the time, I’m certain you would have happily become my bride.”

Dante shook his head in disbelief. “You were behind the trip rope.”

Woodward lifted his shoulders. “I just wanted you out of action for a while. I could see you were fond of Madelene. If you had just kept your attentions where they were meant to be, all would have been well.”

“If you had kissed the right bloody sister all would have been well.” Sophie groaned, tried to sit up and failed.

Ignoring the gun pointed at him, Woodward strode over and stared down at

Sophie. “If you had not become greedy, I could have still swayed her, I’m certain of it.”

“You’re a terrible seducer,” Sophie spat. “You’re not nearly as charming as you think you are.”

“Well, you are not nearly so beautiful as you think you are,” Woodward replied tartly.

Sophie gasped. “How dare you!”

A hand pressed to the back of his head, Dante shared a look with Maddie as she inched toward him, gun still pointed at the pair. He took Maddie’s arm and led her quickly back to the carriage. They climbed up while raised voices echoed into the night as Dante flicked the reins and guided the carriage out of the courtyard.

Maddie peered behind, and he heard her issue a long breath. “I don’t think they’ve followed.”

“They’ll probably continue arguing for some time.”

“What shall become of them?”

“I think I shall not be the only one with a bounty on my head soon.” Dante grinned. “As soon as we return home, I’ll put the word out. No doubt the pair have ruined quite a few lives with their schemes. I’m certain we can have them brought to justice quickly enough.”

Maddie relaxed against the seat. “And everyone shall know Phoebe wasn’t to blame.”

Dante nodded. Maddie was safe and Phoebe was safe. Now he just had to ensure his checkered past didn’t put any of them back in danger again.

Epilogue

Dante should have known she wouldn't be home, and of course she'd be with her family. Her devotion to them was one of the many things he admired about her. He could only hope him following in her footsteps and devoting more time to his own family was enough to make up for the years he'd missed out on.

Snow lingered on the ground, a fine layer that did little to hinder his journey on horseback from Maddie's cottage to the Bloomsbury's house. Christmas Day had been and gone but evidence of continuing festivities lingered in the form of greenery slung over the front door and tucked into windows warmed by lamplight. He smiled as he spied the shadow of someone in one window.

As Dante drew closer, the shadowy figure became clearer, and he recognized the silhouette of Phoebe. It had to be her, as she moved differently to Maddie.

He dismounted from his horse and tied it up outside the house. Who knew if he would even be welcome here. The sound of raucous laughter and chatter grew louder as he approached the front door.

Dante took a deep breath, steeling himself for the reunion that awaited him on the other side. He'd been in London for too long, but he knew that his love for Maddie and his desire to reconnect with her family would carry him through any awkwardness or discomfort.

The housekeeper opened the door, her eyes widening at the sight of him.

Wonderful. That didn't bode well.

"The family is in the drawing room," she said stiffly, taking his coat and hat.

"Don't bother announcing me," he told the woman. He didn't wish to cause a scene when he had been responsible for too many as it was.

The house was filled with warmth and light, the scent of cinnamon and nutmeg wafting through the air. A fire crackled in the hearth, casting

flickering shadows on the faces of the family. Several prominent members of the village joined the family and Dante exhaled.

It seemed his offer of a reward and the subsequent capture of Woodward and Sophie had put an end to the gossip about Phoebe. To all bystanders, she was now simply an innocent caught up in their schemes.

Only Phoebe noticed him lingering in the doorway. Phoebe dashed forward and slung her arms about his waist. "I did not know you were coming."

Neither did he if he was honest. For a time, he'd been tempted to remain in London, to stay far away from Maddie and her family lest he cause them more distress. But he couldn't stay away any longer. He had to see her again, to feel her embrace and hear her voice.

That was if she still wanted him.

"I wanted to surprise you all," Dante said, smiling down at Phoebe. "How have you been?"

"I've been well," Phoebe replied, beaming up at him. "And you?"

"I've been... busy," Dante said, a hint of regret in his voice. "But I'm glad to be back."

He looked around the room, taking in the familiar faces. There was Mr. Bloomsbury, looking more relaxed than their previous meetings, and Mrs. Bloomsbury, her eyes twinkling with amusement as she chatted with one of the village matrons. And then there was Maddie...

Dante's heart skipped a beat as he saw her sitting on a sofa, a cup of tea in hand. She was wearing a deep green gown that brought out the color in her eyes, and her hair was pulled back in a simple braid. She looked more beautiful than he thought possible.

She glanced in his direction and lips parted. She uttered something to the woman next to her and rose slowly. Too slowly. He wanted her near him right this second.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, her voice washing over him like a warm blanket on a cold winter night.

"I wanted to see you," Dante said, taking a step closer to her. "I missed you."

Maddie lifted her chin. "You left without a word, Dante," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "You left me wondering if I'd ever see you again."

"I'm sorry." Dante's throat tightened. "I had to...make things right."

Her gaze lifted to his and she took his arm to lead him out of the room and

into the hallway. “I feared the worst. Feared that—”

“Someone had come for my head.” He smirked. “As you can see it is still intact.”

She didn’t look amused. “Dante, I worried about you all Christmas. It was rather a rotten time.”

“Forgive me, Maddie. I didn’t mean to—” He shoved a hand through his hair. This was not going how he expected. “I wanted to deal with my troubles in London before I returned.”

“And did you?”

He nodded. “Though I must not take all the credit. My sisters were rather instrumental in helping me track down the man responsible for leaving the girl in such dire straits.”

“So the danger is over?”

“It is.”

Maddie let out a sigh of relief and leaned against the wall. “I’m glad to hear that. And I’m glad you’re back.”

He put his hand into his jacket and pulled out a neatly wrapped parcel then handed it over with far more apprehension than was necessary. It was only a damned book after all.

Brows furrowed, Maddie took the parcel and pulled open the delicate ribbon his sister Demeter helped him choose. Her lips parted and she looked up at him then back at the book.

“The book that Mr. Woodward promised me. How did you know?”

“I had a little spy in the family.”

“You wrote to Phoebe?”

He nodded and took a step closer. “There are more books where that came from. Endless books. I’ll give you an entire library if you want.” Dante took a step closer to her, reaching out to gently touch her cheek. “I’m glad to be back,” he said quietly. “I missed you so much.”

Maddie’s eyes met his, and for a moment, they stood there in silence, just looking at each other. Then, without warning, she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. Dante held her close, burying his face in her hair and breathing in her sweet scent.

“I missed you too,” Maddie said, her voice muffled against his chest. “And a library would be nice indeed,” she said with a light laugh.

Dante pulled back slightly, cupping her face in his hands. “I love you, Maddie,” he said, looking into her eyes. “I never stopped loving you.”

Maddie's lips curled into a soft smile. "I love you too," she said, before leaning in to kiss him softly on the lips.

She drew back, her arms still locked around his neck. "I received a letter from a solicitor about Harry's money. You wouldn't know anything about that would you?"

He grinned. "Not a thing."

"Seems there really was an account I knew nothing of. And it seems to be larger in fortune than anyone realized." She tilted her head. "Which is strange because a large deposit was made into it only a week ago."

Dante shrugged, feigning a frown. "Odd indeed. But at least you can look after your family no matter what now."

"My family is doing quite well it seems. Once the depths of Mr. Woodward's scams were revealed, no one could blame Phoebe, and everyone was quite contrite."

"The pair left quite the mark on the country and swindled far too many people it seems."

"I'm only glad they could be stopped." Maddie flashed a smile that had his heart stuttering to a stop. "And I am glad you are here."

"Me too."

"I love you, Dante. I never want to be apart from you again."

"You never have to." He drew her close and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "You never have to," he murmured against her skin. "I hope you do not mind a Society wedding, though." He tugged her against his body and looked into her eyes. "We can honeymoon anywhere you fancy. I'll find you hills to climb."

She beamed at him. "That sounds very acceptable."

"You will marry this scandalous rogue then?" he asked.

"I could not think of anything else I want more."

"That is a yes, is it not?"

Maddie nodded and bit down on her lip to suppress a wide grin.

"Thank the Lord." He gripped her close, burrowing his face in her hair with gratitude. He drew in the delicate floral scent of her before easing back. "I shall spend every day proving that I am worthy of you."

"Perhaps you can start now," she suggested, a coy smile on her lips.

He nodded, unable to suppress his own grin. "That I can do."

Dante captured her lips with his, drawing her into a deep, intoxicating kiss that seared along every inch of his body. He drew away from her when he

heard the rattle of carriages pulling up outside the house.

Many carriages.

“We’re not expecting any more visitors,” Maddie said with a frown.

Dante took her hand and opened the front door to reveal no less than five carriages along with footmen riding on the back queuing up along the road.

He shook his head and chuckled. “I told them to wait for me at home.”

“Them?” Maddie’s mouth dropped open when the first carriage door opened, and his mother and father exited alongside his youngest sister Cassie and her husband.

“Oh boy, Dante, did you bring your entire family with you?”

“Is it done?” his mother demanded, giving Maddie a swift kiss on the cheek and eyeing Dante. “Are you to be wed?”

“Yes, Mother. We are to be wed.”

“Well, praise the heavens,” his mother exclaimed, clasping her hands together. “I can finally rest easy knowing my son has found true love.”

Dante couldn’t help but roll his eyes at his mother’s theatrics, but he couldn’t deny the relief he felt at having his family’s support.

“I’m so glad you’re all here,” Maddie said, eyes wide. “I’m not certain how we’ll fit you all in, but—”

“Now we can celebrate Christmas properly,” his mother declared as the rest of Dante’s family descended upon the house.

He kept hold of Maddie’s hand as her family came to the door to see what the commotion was about.

“I suppose this is what all Christmases are going to be like,” Maddie concluded.

Dante tugged her close as the families converged with greetings and warm embraces. “I certainly hope so.”

He watched, amused, as the families converged as though they had already made a tradition of spending every Christmas together. It wasn’t easy being the most scandalous member of the family. However, with his family’s love and support, he knew now what the future held for him. He could finally put the scandal of his past behind him and look forward to a life with Maddie at his side.

She leaned over to press a kiss to his cheek. “Thank you for bringing them here.”

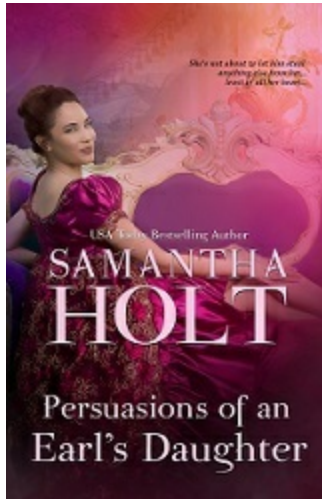
“I do not think I had a choice. They all needed to meet the woman who stole my heart.”

“Can I keep it?” she asked.
“Always,” he promised.

THE END

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I hope you loved meeting the final Musgrave! If you haven't yet read how enemies to lovers Lilly and August met, get your copy of Persuasions of an Earl's Daughter on Amazon today! If you love some hate to love and a few forced proximity moments, you'll adore these two.



She's not about to let him steal anything else from her...least of all her heart...

Lady Lilly Musgrave is strong, capable, and utterly unconcerned with what society thinks of her. So, when her newly inherited horse is stolen, hunting down the culprits seems only natural. Her first suspect is obviously the man who wanted the horse more than she did—an arrogant, unfairly handsome rake with an even more scandalous reputation than her own...

Lord August Beresford is a great many things. But he's most certainly not a thief. He should let her go off on her fool's errand alone...but he can't. So, he'll do whatever is necessary to protect her while she's investigating the crime. He will not, however, do anything foolish along the way...like fall for

the prickly beauty...

It's not long before Lilly realizes there's more to August than meets the eye—and she likes everything she's seeing. Unfortunately, persuading him to trust her with his dark secrets won't be easy. Good thing she was never one to walk away from a challenge...or love...

READ ON FOR CHAPTER ONE OF PERSUASIONS OF AN EARL'S
DAUGHTER

Chapter One

She should have known he'd come.

The moment Lilly had received the news, she should have known.
And been prepared.

Instead, here she was, soaked to her skin, any remnants of curls long gone and plastered to her face and probably a little gray in color considering how cold the sudden torrent of rain had left her. She would not be so lucky as to look bright-eyed and rosy-cheeked after the sudden and short April shower.

And here he was all devastating and handsome.
The bastard.

Lilly plucked a damp strand of hair from her face and shoved it behind her ear. How had he missed the sudden torrent of rain whilst she had suffered its full onslaught? Typical. Though she was willing to wager, even wet, the man would still be handsome.

And devastating.

Lord August Beresford strode across the field toward her, his coat billowing behind him. Ivy clasped the reins of the horse and took a step closer to her as, though Spirit could hide her from him or at the very least offer some sort of shield. Inexplicably, her heart quickened its pace, echoing his efficient and easy stride.

Lilly supposed a man like the Marquis of Blackthorpe made many a pulse quicken. In fact, he probably had a multitude of physical effects on women. However, anyone who knew Lilly Musgrave, knew men did not make her heartbeat quicken.

Until now it seemed.

She tried to swallow past a dry throat and ignore the way his gaze fixated upon her. Really, she should swiftly mount Spirit and ride off. She had no need for this confrontation and even less desire to stand sopping wet in front of a man the scandal sheets claimed to be the most handsome man in all of England.

Unfortunately, they were not wrong, and unfortunately her feet refused to cooperate with her desire to flee. After all, Lilly Musgrave never fled from anything. Her body and mind just simply did not know how to back down. Her competitive desire to win at all costs got her into a great many situations that could probably be avoided. Like this one right now.

The closer he got, the more she realized the silly caricatures in the newspapers had done him little justice. The early morning sunlight streamed about him, highlighting broad shoulders emphasized by a black, slightly faded greatcoat.

He was tall, something she didn't need to be close to realize. After all, her one guilty pleasure in life was the scandal sheets and August Beresford made an appearance in them on a regular basis. She couldn't deny there was something about how he'd been described that fascinated her. How must it be to be a man so blessed with wealth and good looks that one could simply breeze through life and do whatever one wished and go wherever one felt like?

He removed his hat as he neared. Lilly couldn't decide if her heart had picked up its pace so much that she simply could not differentiate between each beat, or if it ceased functioning all together.

"They lied," she murmured to herself.

She pressed her lips together and forced herself to take in a long breath whilst she planted her feet firmly, her grip on her horse's reins about the only thing preventing her from collapsing into a puddle.

August Beresford stopped a few paces from her.

The scandal sheets lied.

He was not the most handsome man in all of England.

His mouth curved in one corner as though something about her amused him. Golden sunlight glinted off his thick curls. A long, aristocratic nose led her gaze down to his chin, where a slight dimple sat as though God had decided the man needed at least one imperfection then got it entirely wrong, creating a point of utter fascination.

Her attention did not linger there long, though. How could it when he looked at her with those ridiculous blue eyes? No one should have eyes that blue, much less a man. And in any other face, they might almost look childish except when countered with the strong planes of his face it was nothing short of devastating.

He was most certainly *not* the most handsome man in all of England.

Lilly felt fairly confident in her assertion that he was probably the most handsome man in the whole world.

And all she had done so far was stare at him.

“No.”

He blinked and the amusement switched to puzzlement, one tawny brow lifting.

“No?” he repeated.

It was all she could summon.

“No,” she repeated.

No, she would not let herself be affected by something as superficial as good looks. No, she would not allow herself to stand here and gawp any longer. And no, she would not enter into negotiations with him.

There was one reason and one reason alone a man like August Beresford would seek a woman like her out.

He wanted something.

“Just no?”

Lilly nodded firmly. “You heard me.”

“You have not even heard what I have to say yet.”

“I do not need to. I know why you are here.”

“My lady, I—”

“If you will excuse me, I should be returning home.” She glanced him over as coolly as she could muster. “I’m sure your carriage is awaiting you somewhere.” She peered past him to see if she could spot the vehicle on the road that wound past her father’s estate. A man like Lord Blackthorpe probably took a carriage everywhere. After all, he would not be so foolish to let himself get caught in the rain.

“I desire but a moment of your time.”

He said it so reasonably. As though he hadn’t uttered a word that sent sparks through her mind. That would send sparks through any woman’s mind.

Desire.

He’d know all about that word, she supposed. Too many women desired him. Why would they not? By all accounts, he was charming, adventurous, and worldly. Some even suggested he had a touch of the devil to him which for many a woman would only increase their interest.

She hated herself for feeling even the slightest inkling of curiosity or pretending she had some idea of what sort of a man he really was. She didn’t

know him. Devouring every sentence written about the man didn't mean anything. After all, words could be exaggerated. Made up even. She would do herself no favors by being fascinated by a man who only wanted one thing from her.

"No," she said one more time, managing to muster a little more volume. "No, you are not having my horse. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever."



To say August Beresford wasn't used to women saying no to him was an understatement. Unless, of course, it was *no, don't leave*.

He smothered the amusement the thought caused him, knowing no wicked smiles would help him in this situation.

In fact, he wasn't certain what would. He wasn't certain at all what to do with Lady Lilly Musgrave. She was nothing like he expected her to be.

Approaching her alone had been deliberate. Manipulative even. He didn't want her young brother or father over her shoulder, watching their interaction closely. He certainly didn't want them trying to change her mind about selling the horse to him. It seemed, however, it was not a brother or father he needed to worry about. The woman had already made her mind up without a second's thought.

Glancing her over, August noted the lifted chin, the firmly set jaw, the hard gaze. He took in all of her in seconds. From the lack of a bonnet or hat to the dark, damp hair clinging to a long neck, down to a gown that might have been cream once but was hemmed with mud and plastered to a slender figure devoid of curves but intriguing nonetheless, most especially when one noted the twin points of her nipples poking through fabric not designed for a sudden shower. She should have looked vulnerable or at the very least unattractive.

But something in the way she held herself, in the proud rise of her shoulders and the shameless stance that said *yes sir, I am cold, and these are my nipples, but I do not rightly care* made her attractive indeed.

The attitude combined with wide dark eyes set against narrow features made him wonder if he should have done more research on Lilly Musgrave. All he knew of her was that she had been out of London Society since her family had fallen out of favor years ago and that the Musgraves were considered scandalous indeed.

How that was when the rest of the Musgrave daughters were all married

off to men of good standing, he wasn't certain, but because of their self-exile to Bath and his years of travelling, he'd never come across any of them. He almost regretted it now. If he'd been a little better prepared, he wouldn't have a fight on his hands.

Or should he say a little tiff? He doubted she'd fight him for long. She might seem unimpressed with him for now, but a few charming words and she'd be willing to offer more than her horse to him, he'd wager.

Not that he would take her up on the matter.

A shiver she tried to disguise with the bunching of her fists traipsed across her shoulders. Damn. He wanted her vulnerable to his deal, but he couldn't have her freezing to death.

"Perhaps this conversation would be better had if you were a little warmer." August took a step toward her and shucked off his coat.

Her brows knitted but she remained frozen until he slung his coat about her shoulders, and she flinched, and her eyes widened. It swallowed her and if it wasn't for the way her lips pulled into a grim line of determination, he might be guilty of thinking she looked rather endearing in his coat.

"Perhaps this conversation need not happen at all, Lord Blackthorpe."

"I only wish to make a proposal."

A hand to the lapel of his coat, she lifted it off one shoulder, paused, then released it, letting it drape back over her body. He'd half anticipated her throwing it into the mud, but it seemed he could not anticipate a single thing about Lady Lilly Musgrave.

"Well, I have no desire to hear your proposal, Lord Blackthorpe."

"A moment of your time is all I ask." He moved closer until they were barely a pace away from each other. He affected his best smile and waited for the harshness to leave her expression.

It remained. Hardened more even. His smile grew genuine, and she lifted her gaze to the skies with a sigh.

"A minute. Nothing more."

Before he could reply, she stuffed a hand under the coat and fished around before bringing out a gold pocket watch. August could only imagine where she had secreted it and his fingers twitched with the desire to feel the precious metal to see if it was warm from where it had touched her skin.

She flicked it open and nodded at him. "Go on then."

Damn it. She really did mean he only had a minute. "As you know, Icarus was my uncle's horse."

“I’m well aware of that.” Lady Lilly’s gaze remained on the clock.

“And you were gifted him in my uncle’s will.”

“I am aware of that too.” Her tone insinuated utter boredom.

The slightest pang of panic struck him. He couldn’t recall anyone ever seeming bored by him, even when he had nothing of note to say. In fact, he’d begun to take a slight perverse pleasure in muttering silly statements to see who was listening to him. Nine times out of ten, it went entirely unnoticed, and men and women alike agreed wholeheartedly with whatever ridiculous phrase he had just pronounced.

“I should be grateful indeed if you would consider selling me the horse.”

“I—”

“I would pay more than he is worth—”

“How much more?”

“Ten per cent.”

She smirked. “He is one of the best racing horses in the country.”

“Very well, twenty per cent.”

Lilly snapped the pocket watch shut. “No,” she said simply. “And your time is up.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Are you not willing to negotiate?”

“I have no need of your money, Lord Blackthorpe, and your uncle willed me that horse because he knew I loved him greatly.”

“He’s a racehorse,” August spluttered. “What on earth are you even going to do with him? He cannot live a sedentary life like your palfrey here.”

“I am not ignorant, Lord Blackthorpe.” She lifted a boot to the stirrups of the saddle and swung herself with ease over her horse. It was only then he realized she didn’t even have a side saddle. Were it not for his coat covering most of her, he was certain he would see at the very least some bare thigh.

He wanted to see bare thigh.

He wanted to see more.

August forced his gaze to her face. A mere bit of leg wasn’t going to distract him from his mission. He wanted that horse. Needed it even. And not just for the huge amounts of money it earned in flat races.

“You’re no racer, my lady.”

She flashed a grin. “That, Lord Blackthorpe, is where you are wrong.”

She dug her heels into the horse and moved away with such speed it took

him a moment to realize she was flying across the fields away from her home and he had no chance of catching up with her, even if he dashed back to the carriage awaiting him on the road.

It took him another minute for him to remember she wore his coat.

August shook his head and chuckled. Not only had he not negotiated the sale of his late-uncle's horse, but he had also lost a much-loved coat. It seemed Lilly Musgrave intended to put up quite the fight.

And a rather large part of him looked forward to the battle.

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Books In This Series

The Duchess's Investigative Society

Secrets of a Duke's Daughter

A duke's daughter must be prepared for whatever life—and love—throws her way...

Lady Cassandra Fallon is finally ready to take control of her life and join her late mother's investigative society. She's more than confident she can do the job—even when her first case involves a potentially deadly scandal. What she's not quite prepared for is her brother's attractive (and increasingly distracting) friend acting as her self-appointed bodyguard...

When Lord Luke promised his best friend he'd keep an eye on Cassie, he meant it. But the brazen and entirely too alluring woman she's become is a far cry from the mischievous, freckled girl she used to be. Luke knows a lowly viscount has no business longing for (or touching) a duke's daughter. But against all reason...he does...

She craves independence. He only craves her. An epic battle of the sexes is at hand. But will love be enough to get them to happily ever after? Cassie and Luke will soon find out...

Temptations of a Duke's Daughter

Solving a murder is dangerous business. So is falling in love...

Chastity, daughter of the Duke of Daventry, will not stand idly by while her sister is suspected of murder. Since no one wants to help, she'll take matters into her own hands. The plan? Simple. She'll disguise herself as a servant and investigate. But when her ruse leads her to the enigmatic Lord Kendall,

Chastity soon realizes nothing in her life will ever be simple again...

As much as Valentine would like to ignore the scheming beauty who claims to be a servant, he simply can't. He needs her. Bringing his footman's killer to justice would be impossible without her, because the vivacious Chastity can do what he can't—talk to people and gain their trust. So, he'll accept the chaos she brings into his life. Accepting her into his heart, however, is another matter entirely...

Fortunately for Chastity and Valentine, intrigue has a way of putting lovers on the path to happily ever after. But first, they've got a killer to catch...

Wagers of a Duke's Daughter

She wanted adventure. He's about to give her that and so much more...

Lady Demeter Fallon cannot help but want more from life. Now almost a spinster, she's spent so long in the shadows of her sisters that the desire to do something exciting is nearly driving her mad. Which might explain what she's doing when he finds her...

Jacob Blake certainly didn't expect to find a lady in disguise gambling, but he knows a fortuitous turn of fate when he sees it. Demeter is in a perfect position to help him investigate the charming liar who's laid claim to his aunt's estate. The plan is in place. Now all he'll have to do is figure out how to keep his hands off his lovely new accomplice.

When a wallflower and a rake team up on a secret mission, can happily ever after be far behind?

Demeter and Jacob are about to find out...

Seductions of a Duke's Daughter

They'll work together, but love is not part of the plan. Or so they assumed...

Men have no interest in Eleanor, and she has no interest in them. The handsome rake who spends entirely too much time trying to charm and seduce her is no exception. Which makes it all the more frustrating that she must now work with him to determine who is attempting to ruin her sister's wedding...

Lord Oliver Hart, Viscount Ashford hasn't a clue what he did to make an enemy of Ellie. But he has no doubt he'll win her over eventually. For now, he'll focus on uncovering who has been trying to sabotage his best friend's wedding. And if the investigation also helps him win over his prickly little wallflower...all the better.

When a dedicated spinster and a confirmed bachelor join forces to solve a mystery, is happily ever after even a possibility?

Kisses of a Rebel Rogue

The only thing darker than his reputation is his desire for her...

From homeless street thief to business owner, Charlotte Bailey has come a long way. Which makes it all the more distressing when an old friend arrives, asking her for the impossible. She never thought refusing him would put her life in danger. And she certainly wasn't prepared for a sinfully attractive rake with a past darker than her own to step into the role of her protector. But, here she is...

Peregrine Morgan can't abide a mystery—and the lovely Charlotte is indeed a mystery. Initially, he thought she was involved with the dangerous criminal he'd been hunting. But now, he's not sure of anything. He has no idea why he feels so compelled to rescue her. Even more perplexing is his desire to keep her by his side (and in his bed) even after the threat has passed...

With danger lurking around every corner, will Charlotte be able to put her faith in Peregrine—and in love—when it matters the most? Or will happily ever after remain elusive for this reluctant heroine and her unlikely hero?

Mysteries of an Earl's Daughter

Lady Clementine Musgrave had no intention of getting roped into her cousins' investigative society. But that doesn't mean she can let the mystery of the sighting of a dead man go unsolved. The fact that the man just happens to be the uncle of her greatest enemy, the loathsome (and unfairly handsome) man who helped get her family cut from society, only makes the intrigue more delicious...

The Marquis of Rochdale doesn't have time for ghost stories. Roman's focus needs to remain on protecting his title and arranging an advantageous marriage, not on helping Clementine solve a supposed mystery. They're complete opposites, she hates him, and she's entirely unsuitable. But for some reason, that all slips his mind when she's in his arms...

He can't afford a scandal. Her life is nothing but scandalous. Can Clementine and Roman find a way to overcome their differences and carve out a path to happily ever after? Possibly. But first, they'll have to figure out why a dead man is wandering the streets of Bath...

Loves of an Earl's Daughter

Mortal danger might not ruin their friendship. But falling in love at Christmas most certainly could...

Violet Musgrave is used to heartbreak. The string of men who've let her down over the years made sure of that. So, she has no intention of falling for her handsome best friend, an unrepentant rake she adores. Being alone would be much safer. Or so she thought...

Duke Cameron knows he can never be the kind of man Violet deserves. He's just not built for happily ever after endings. Strictly avoiding romantic entanglements is the only rule he's ever followed. But lately, when he's with Violet, he can't help wondering if it's time to tear that rule asunder once and for all...

When Duke and Violet find themselves embroiled in a mystery that endangers all they hold dear, their feelings for each other will be put to the ultimate test. But when it matters most, will the promise of forever prove

worth the potential cost to their friendship—and their hearts?

Scandals of an Earl's Daughter

A history of scandal might be the only thing these opposites have in common...

Lady Ivy Musgrave wasn't especially surprised when a case of mistaken identity led to her near ruination. After all, scandal seems to be her birthright. What did come as a shock, however, was the scarred, wounded soldier who came to her rescue...and her overwhelming attraction to him...

Lord Cillian Pearce had no desire to be anyone's hero. But that didn't mean he'd abandon the lovely Ivy in her time of need. Their arranged marriage was an obligation he'd just have to live with. Falling in love with his new bride, though, was entirely out of the question...

It's not long before Ivy learns there's more to her brooding husband than meets the eye—and Cillian learns that happily ever after with Ivy might be possible after all. But when an enemy from Cillian's past threatens the delicate bonds he's started to form with Ivy, can their marriage—and hearts—survive the fallout?

Persuasions of an Earl's Daughter

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About The Author

Samantha Holt



USA TODAY Bestselling Author Samantha Holt is known for fun, witty, and usually steamy historical romances. She's been a full-time writer for longer than she ever thought possible having originally trained as a nurse and an archaeologist. She's a champion napper, owner of too many animals, mum to

twins, and lives in a small village near the very middle of England.

She's usually writing (or napping) but when she's not, Samantha is plotting (books of course!) with her husband, drinking coffee, climbing hills that are far too high for her fitness levels or visiting stately homes and pretending she's posh.

You can claim a free book by signing up to her newsletter
www.samanthaholtromance.com

Books By This Author

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