



Fleet Street Scoundrel

ANNA BELLE
ANDERS

Fleet Street Scoundrel



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Fleet Street Scoundrel

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A FEISTY DEBUTANTE AND A DETERMINED EARL...

When scandal threatens her brother, there is only one thing for Lady Caroline Rutherford to do. She'll use her wit and pluck to land a position at the paper that threatens to spread the rumors. Her family can't be ruined if the lies are kept out of print.

Mr. Maxwell Black, the Earl of Helton, took ownership of the London Gazette to reestablish the paper as a legitimate source of news. Unfortunately, the paper's issues run far deeper than he ever imagined, and when help comes along, it's from a most unlikely source: a managing debutante.

The deeper they dig, the more dangerous their quest becomes, and soon, Caroline's very life hangs in the balance. He wanted to tell a good story, but he's embroiled in one of his own, but most of all, he needs to also Caroline safe.

Because this headline is breaking news, but it could break him.

And with love on the byline, he needs to decide...

Does he bury the lead and cut his losses, or put his heart on the line and make it front page news?

Fall in love with these rakish fellows as you make your way through Annabelle Anders' latest series: Rakes of Rotten Row.

Six London Gents wreaking havoc in Mayfair—one heart at a time.

1. Hanover Square Spare
2. Piccadilly Player
3. Fleet Street Scoundrel

And coming in 2024:

1. Pall Mall Peer
2. Bachelor of Bond Street
3. Regent Street Rogue

FOOT IN MOUTH



“Slow down, you little monster!” Lady Caroline Rutherford tugged at the leading string beginning to slip through her grip. “If you pull me into the water, this will be the last time I bring you to the park. Do you understand?” But she didn’t really mean it. Because Pip, her brother’s border collie, was a country dog, used to running untethered through the fields at home—much like Caroline herself.

It wasn’t his fault they’d had to temporarily move to the city.

She ignored a cold shiver as she recalled the reason for the move. Even a full year following the events that brought them to Mayfair, the recollection haunted her.

As it likely would forever.

“Shall I take the dog for you?” Eloisa, Caroline’s lady’s maid, watched her with an expression that fell somewhere between concern and embarrassment. “I can handle him, thank you, Eloisa.” Caroline dipped her chin to her lady’s maid—an irritant, ahem—a *luxury* she’d never asked for nor wanted. But then she forced a weak smile. Being foisted on Caroline as chaperone was hardly Eloisa’s doing.

Ever since her brother had unexpectedly become the Earl of Standish, Caroline, her mother, and her two younger sisters’ lives had changed

dramatically.

And with that full year since her father's death behind her, Caroline was expected to mingle with the ladies and gentlemen of the *ton*. Melanie, the eldest of her two sisters, would come out after Caroline secured a match, and although Josephine was still too young, her time would come soon enough.

So even though she found the constant round of festivities tedious, for the sake of her mother and sisters, Caroline would make the best of it.

If she could recover, that was.

Because two weeks ago, at the very ripe age of four and twenty, Caroline had debuted in a manner that surely would go down as one of the worst in history—embarrassing her family in the process.

And yet the world hadn't ended.

Caroline fanned her face as the memory roused a flush of embarrassment. She'd never claimed to be swanlike, but under *normal* circumstances, she wasn't the awkward person the *ton* believed her to be.

Based on one night. One minute. Less than that, really.

Because, apparently, the act of dressing up in pastels and lace, standing around a ballroom with her mother watching, and waiting for an eligible bachelor to seek her out—all in front of a room full of total strangers—stole any trace of grace Caroline thought she'd possessed.

Pip jerked on the string again, and before Caroline could tighten her hold, the unruly collie broke free—not toward the lake, but toward one of the ornate benches, where a gentleman sat reading a newspaper.

But it was not the man who had caught Pip's attention. Rather, it was his well-mannered black and tan Yorkshire terrier, about one-tenth Pip's size,

who sat looking dignified beside him, a pretty little ribbon tied in a neat bow around her neck.

This could mean trouble. Pip was capable of impressive speeds and would only be caught when he was ready. Glancing around the vast swath of grass, Caroline winced. Would she bring more attention to herself by chasing after him, or by simply waiting for him to return?

A flurry of high-pitched barking erupted, answering her question for her.

“Pip!” Lifting her skirts so as not to trip, she ran after him. “Come back here, you monster!”

But, of course, Pip proceeded to lure the terrier away from her owner, who had set his newspaper aside to stare at the melee over his spectacles.

“*No, no, no!*” Caroline whispered under her breath. The very last thing she needed was to be involved in another embarrassing incident! She needed to secure the rebellious collie!

But as she approached the park bench at the center of all the ruckus, she noticed that although this fellow wore a fine wool jacket and elegant trousers, he wasn’t as fastidiously put together as most gentlemen of the *ton*.

And when his gaze caught hers, she noticed dark shadows beneath eyes the most stunning color of green she’d ever seen—vivid, with shades of evergreen.

Most notable of all, however, his expression lacked the disdain and disapproval she’d grown accustomed to.

Even if she did recognize a hint of laughter there. He seemed amused by the dogs, not by her.

“I’m so very sorry!” Caroline called out. “It’s just that...” She halted as

Pip turned around and approached the man, nosing curiously at the leg of his trousers. Initially nervous, she was pleasantly surprised when the stranger reached down with an indulgent grin, ruffling the fur behind the border collie's ears and then rubbing his hands along Pip's back and neck.

“A fine dog. Did you say his name was Pip?”

Caroline exhaled, momentarily speechless. It hadn't been very long since her disastrous come-out, but ever since, she'd been given the cut more often than not.

But this man—a literal stranger—watching her from behind gleaming silver spectacles showed only good humor and not a hint of judgement. He shoved back longer than fashionable locks of inky black hair and tilted his head, his sensuous lips lifting into a half smile.

He was...

Gorgeous!

A chill ran through Caroline, and she swallowed hard.

“I—yes. This monster's name is Pip—Pippen, actually. My brother named him after my mother's grandfather,” Caroline rambled before tearing her gaze back to his little dog, who seemed equally approving, with her tail wagging back and forth across the grass. “And what do you call this little darling?”

He dropped his gaze to the tiny body beside him and grimaced. “Charlie, actually. Despite the emasculating ribbon. He is male and he belongs to my mother.”

“Well, emasculated or not, his proper behavior is a credit to both Charlie and your mother.” Pip could learn a thing or two from the little terrier. Caroline bent down to retrieve the border collie's leading string, and this time

she wound it around her wrist several times.

“I’ll tell her you approve.” He laughed again. It was a deep and pleasant tone that vibrated from the top of Caroline’s head all the way to her toes. And for the first time in months... a light cracked open inside of her and she found herself grinning.

Not that she hadn’t smiled in the past year, but she’d done so because it was expected. Feeling this fleeting hint of joy, she didn’t want the sensation to end.

“Pip belongs to my brother.” She shuffled her feet back and forth. Had she told him that already?

“Exuberant fellow.” The man rose from the bench.

She immediately pictured Reed running and jumping across the park. “No one will ever accuse my brother of that.” It took all her self-discipline to keep from giggling.

“Not your brother. The dog—Pip.”

Again, the laugh. She’d never met this man before, she was sure of that, and yet he seemed familiar.

“Ah, yes.” Caroline dropped her gaze to the collie. Propriety prohibited her from enjoying the pleasant company of this gentleman much longer. She may have literally fallen on her face at her debut, but even she wasn’t so countrified that she didn’t comprehend the most basic rules of society.

She held one finger up so Eloisa wouldn’t grow impatient and conceded that she’d have to take her leave. “I am very sorry to have interrupted you.”

“Are you? I’m not.” He cocked a brow, and she wondered... Was he flirting with her?

As a flirt, she'd proved herself an utter failure and for the first time since coming to London, she wished that wasn't the case.

The normal debutantes giggled and asked questions and fluttered their lashes, wasted efforts, or so Caroline had believed.

She considered attempting to mimic the less ridiculous gestures, only to immediately dismiss the idea. Instead, she glanced to the abandoned newspaper this stranger had been reading. *London Daily Gazette* was printed boldly across the top of the front page.

She wrinkled her nose. "Waste of a paper." Surely, everyone must feel the same?

As an avid reader, Caroline had found the publication laden with mostly half-truths and made-up stories. She couldn't begin to count how many inaccuracies she'd discovered since last spring, when her mother had ordered a subscription delivered daily.

"You don't find it informative?" His smile fell. "Or entertaining?" Oh dear. Apparently, he did not feel the same.

Everything she knew about being a lady would suggest she retreat. Compliment the articles. Fawn over his excellent taste.

But really, it was a terrible paper. She couldn't in good conscience allow its misinformation to spread unchecked. "Too many errors." She wrinkled her nose. "This new owner—this bumbling publisher—well, he wouldn't know real facts if they jumped up and bit him in the—" She cut herself off. "If he cares at all about printing the truth, his first priority ought to be to check for accuracy. I don't know how many times I've read a story and within a few hours, learned it was only partially true, or in some cases, a complete fabrication. Quite disappointing, really. I expected more."

The gentleman stared at her, his eyes wary now. “But most of the articles are spot on,” he argued.

“And that’s unfortunate,” she responded as she straightened up. “Because a single bad one taints the entire paper. Erroneous reports rob every other story of legitimacy. This Mr. Black fellow is little more than an imposter and would do all of London a favor to sell out so a real newspaper man can take over.”



MAXWELL BLACK FURROWED his brows and inhaled. By God, the chit packed a wallop. He raised a hand to his chest, thinking it would have been less painful to have been stabbed through the heart.

By attacking the Gazette, she’d hit him where it hurt the most. The assault had come disguised in perfume and lace.

He’d initially been amused to be interrupted by the dog, chased by a delightful bundle of femininity. Her deep blue eyes sparkled with intelligence even though she lacked common beauty. Escaped strands of hair peeking out from beneath her bonnet weren’t quite brown, nor were they blonde either, and she possessed a rather plain figure.

There was something about her, though—an uncommon genuineness. She’d come running after her dog rather than sending her servant, and by the time she’d caught up to him, her cheeks had flushed a pretty pink. Her smile was infectious, and for some reason, he’d found himself making conversation with her.

But then she’d attacked his newspaper, his *baby*—and ruined it all.

He was no stranger to criticism, of course. It would be damn near impossible not to step on any toes in his line of business, especially those of

the nobility, who were used to operating without such scrutiny. They gossiped amongst each other and made their subtle implications and threats in the ways he had come to expect.

This was the first time, however, that anyone had insulted the paper so plainly to his face.

But rather than tell her that he was, in fact, the object of her contempt, he clenched his teeth and allowed her to continue ranting.

He'd never met the chit, and arguing would be a waste of his time.

"Not that it isn't interesting," she continued, shrugging delicate shoulders. "It simply isn't dependable." And then she smiled. "But I will stop now and apologize for being far too opinionated."

Max blinked and stifled the offense he wanted to take. What did this woman know about running a newspaper? She was a sheltered young miss who had likely never even seen a printing press, let alone been involved in the fast-paced production process of a publication like the Gazette.

Another man might find her candidness refreshing, or even admire her forthright attitude.

But in this case, such honesty simply stung.

"And you are Miss...?" He arched an eyebrow, inviting her to fill in the blank. It was not at all proper to ask for her name without a formal introduction, but Max hadn't been concerned with propriety for some time now.

"Caroline," she replied. "Lady Caroline."

"*Lady* Caroline," he repeated. She didn't act like a typical lady. "Are you always so loud with your assessments?"

Her blue eyes widened in surprise, and the flush in her cheeks spread to her neck. "Unfortunately, yes."

He could leave the conversation here and let the woman return to her hovering chaperone, forget the whole encounter. That was what he *should* do, honestly.

Instead, unable to stop himself, Max pushed the issue further. "The Gazette is quite popular these days. Is there *anything* you like about it? Anything at all?"

He must be some sort of masochist.

Lady Caroline stared across the lake for a moment before replying. "My mother subscribed because she likes to keep up with the goings-on amongst the *ton*, and I admit I do appreciate that society gossip has been limited." She tilted her head. "Unfortunately, I've come to realize the inaccuracies bring into question any useful information it might have."

Maxwell lifted his foot to rest on the opposite knee and leaned back, his gaze locked with hers. "It takes a keen mind to distinguish fact from fiction, especially in the world of newspapers. Do you also read the Times? The Sun? The Globe? Surely, you don't spend all your free time searching the dailies for mistakes?"

She gave a shy smile. "Only the Gazette. But I've always been a voracious reader, and I believe the truth is more important than anything else." She glanced around the park and then frowned. "I'm afraid my maid is watching us and she is looking quite disapproving."

"But of course." Max ought to stand. He ought to bow.

He did neither.

"My apologies for detaining you," he said.

She hadn't stepped away, however. "It has, indeed, been a pleasure."

"Indeed." Except for the part about the Gazette being little better than a piece of trash. He could appreciate her passion for knowledge, but the unsolicited criticisms, whether she knew that was what they were or not, had greatly soured his mood.

Max supposed it wouldn't much matter soon enough. The sun was beginning to dip in the west, which meant the lackluster individuals that made up most of society would rob the park of any peacefulness soon.

Lady Caroline glanced over her shoulder to where her maid stood by. "Good day..."

But he did not fill in his name.

"Good day, my lady."

She dipped her chin, a delicate but stubborn looking chin, and stepped back.

And in the next moment, she was gone.

EXPECTATIONS



Max swirled the amber liquid in his glass and studied his cards as he contemplated his next move. He and a handful of London's elites had defected from the ballroom in favor of gambling in the quiet of Viscount and Viscountess Darlington's library.

Max wasn't the sort to usually attend these events, but for his mother's sake, made an occasional appearance.

"*You are the Earl, after all,*" she often pointed out—not knowing what a sore spot that was for him.

The crooning notes from the small orchestra playing in the adjacent room floated around him, and he couldn't help but wonder if the young woman he'd met the previous afternoon was amongst the guests.

She was a lady, after all.

But then he dismissed the thought. If she was here, she would be husband hunting.

Max refused to be prey. Because any lady who set her sights on becoming the next Countess of Helton would be sorely disappointed.

"What'll it be, Helton?" Benjamin Lancaster, the Marquess of Winterhope, nudged him.

Maxwell glanced down, having already forgotten the cards he'd been dealt. It wasn't a particularly strong hand, nor was it unsalvageably weak—three of a kind, all sevens. Still.

"I fold." He placed his cards face down. His head wasn't in the game—best not to extend himself.

He leaned back and watched as Winterhope and a few others finished the hand, hearing distantly the grumbles and groans as Westcott won with a high two pair. Despite himself, Maxwell found his mind constantly returning to the things that woman—Lady Caroline—had said about his newspaper.

She was exaggerating. The mistakes could not be all that problematic. They certainly weren't as ubiquitous as she claimed.

Max and his reporters thoroughly went over every single issue of the Gazette before they went to print, usually working into the early hours of the morning. He couldn't imagine so many inaccuracies slipping past all of them. It was impossible. Absurd.

"You seem distracted, old man—more so than usual," Winterhope remarked, breaking Maxwell out of his reverie.

The marquess, who at seven and twenty was less than a year younger than Max, wore a turquoise jacket and a waistcoat embroidered with silver thread. Underneath those extravagantly colorful garments, he wore a pristine white linen shirt with more ruffles and lace than half the debutantes present.

Where Maxwell preferred comfort and utility, the marquess embraced the finery and lifestyle of nobility, to the point where he could almost be mistaken for a dandy. Winterhope had been born to hold the title, and did so unapologetically.

Max forced a smile. "Just tired, my friend. Busy day at the Gazette, you

know."

The marquess laughed. "Ah, yes, the newspaper business. I can't imagine dealing with that every day. But you seem to have a passion for it."

"Oh, spare me, I've seen you with your horses."

Winterhope nodded. "*Touché.*"

Maxwell chuffed, not wanting to delve deeper into his problems at the Gazette. It was, indeed, his passion, but also his responsibility. He'd made vast improvements on the production side, even going so far as to fund the development of potentially cutting-edge printing presses, massive machines fueled by steam engines that would eventually put out ten times the number of papers he could print now.

The print quality was better, making it easier to read, and these new machines could produce four times the number of copies as the old ones. Unfortunately, they struggled on the editorial side.

And Max didn't know what the hell to do about it.

"How are things at Hope Downs?" he asked. Winterhope had recently opened one of England's finest stables, along with an increasingly popular racetrack just outside of York.

Maxwell's friend frowned. "According to my stablemaster, all is well, but I'd rather be there myself."

"Duty calls, eh?" the recently wed baron pointed out. Both Westcott and Winterhope, unlike Max, took their obligations to parliament seriously. "I'll take two." He scratched the table, placing two cards face down.

"Indeed," Winterhope agreed. But then he pinched his mouth shut.

As the three of them sometimes worked together fighting Mayfair's less-

than-upstanding residents, they usually discussed far more important matters, but never while in public. They limited those dealings to one of Malum's private meeting rooms.

Malum, as in the *Duke* of Malum, who, despite his title, existed on the fringes of the *ton*—for having taken over the operations of a high-end brothel, the Domus Emporium. Not that other aristocrats didn't patronize Malum's luxurious establishment. In fact, the majority of Malum's customers were members of the nobility. But they preferred for the rest of society to believe they lacked such carnal appetites.

Maxwell played a few more hands but then, seeing his luck had abandoned him this evening, excused himself shortly after. As he entered the grand hall, his mother waved him over to where she sat beside the Duchess of Crossings.

But it was the Countess of Helton who drew the most attention. Tonight was no different, and the colors in her flowing gown matched her vivacious personality.

She was more than a handsome woman, however, and possessed all the grace and charm of her late father's bloodline. This was her world and Max couldn't bear to imagine what she'd do without it.

"Ah, there you are, Maxwell," she said, her eyes shining with pleasure. "You remember her Grace, the Duchess of Crossings." Max bowed appropriately and the duchess dipped her chin, a disinterested frown marring her features. Married to a blighter such as Crossings, the lady had good reason for her sour mood.

A staying hand clutched his sleeve as his mother asked, "Have you secured a partner for the supper dance yet?"

This was the problem with attending these sorts of events. *Expectations*. “Not yet, Mother, but I’m here now, aren’t I?” He glanced around and, when his eyes landed on a familiar figure, his irritation spiked.

Lady Caroline.

Hovering near one of the trees brought inside for decoration, she looked quite alone, and nearly as uncomfortable as he felt. Her eyes met his, and a jolt of awareness shot through him.

All too knowingly, his mother’s gaze followed his, and she made a clicking sound with her tongue. “That poor girl,” she said.

Max turned back to his mother in surprise. “Why do you say that?”

“I would think you’d be well-informed of these things, Maxwell. It should have been written about on your society page—if you saw fit to publish a proper one like I keep telling you...”

He’d slashed the gossip section to half a page six months ago, believing the paper ought to be above such nonsense.

But apparently, according to Lady Caroline anyway, most of it was rubbish anyhow. The vexing young woman dropped her gaze and plucked at the lace on her gloves.

Maxwell folded his arms across his chest and waited.

Because he knew his mother all too well, and the one thing she loved more than almost anything was a good scandal.

“Lady Caroline debuted two weeks ago when the Countess of Standish, her new sister-in-law, held a ball in her honor.”

He tilted his head. “She is Standish’s—”

“Sister. And Lady Standish is her Grace’s daughter.” His mother gestured

to her present companion.

But Max was more concerned with the first bit of information.

“She is Lady Caroline... *Rutherford?*”

“Charlatans,” the duchess inserted. Lord Standish had married the woman’s youngest daughter without the duke’s approval. Messy business to be sure.

And Max himself couldn’t help but partially agree. Too many rumors surrounded the Earl of Standish, a man who’d been fourth in line to the Standish earldom, and then inherited unexpectedly.

Furthermore, the man had double-crossed Max. And although the matter had mostly resolved itself, Max couldn’t help but feel bitter. Especially now that Standish had been invited to participate in a few of their secret meetings at the Domus Emporium.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Dreadful business. Very unfortunate. The major-domo introduced her and her brother, and she looked very pretty, actually, standing at the top of the steps looking over Standish’s ballroom, wearing one of Madam Chantal’s latest designs—a baby blue silk with those new puffed sleeves. Quite striking, really.” Wrinkles appeared on his mother’s forehead.

“And...?” Max prompted her.

“As she began descending, she stepped on the hem of that magnificent creation, tearing it and losing her balance at the same time. The earl made a gallant effort to keep her from falling, but it was too late. But that’s not even the worst of it. When she landed, her skirts had twisted around her waist.” His mother ended the last part on a whisper. “I’ll leave the rest up to your imagination.”

Max lifted his brows, his imagination already at work. Her ankles were no doubt slim, and her thighs creamy and soft. He dismissed the image for another time.

If Lady Caroline hadn't so thoroughly insulted his paper, he would almost feel sorry for her. "Was she hurt?"

"I'm sure she walked away with a few bruises, but it's her reputation that suffered the most. I can't imagine any gentleman of consequence will want to associate with her now, not after she made such a spectacle of herself. I daresay, if Lord Standish cared enough to consider her feelings, he'd have sent her back to the country already."

Max turned back to where Lady Caroline stood, his interest piqued all the more.

"Have you been introduced?" his mother asked.

"Not properly."

Lady Helton's eyes took on a deliberate gleam. "Every lady deserves to dance at least one set."

"I suppose," Max conceded.

His mother nodded and then, having made her decision, tucked her hand through Max's arm and turned to the duchess. "If you'll excuse us, your Grace."

"But of course," the duchess answered, her mouth pinched.

Rather than protest and embarrass his mother, which was something Max would never do, he allowed her to lead him across the parquet floor to where Lady Caroline was pressed against the wall—partially behind a ficus.

As they neared the tree, his mother's expression turned to one of delight.

She'd been a staple to the *ton* for decades and was quite good at this.

"Come out from behind there, my lady. Never hide your light, I always say. Especially when one looks as pretty as you do this evening."

The girl's smile was more of a wince. "Thank you, my lady. You are looking quite handsome yourself." She curtsied even as she shot Maxwell a curious glance.

"Oh, you needn't tell fibs." His mother smiled. "I know I'm past my prime."

Max barely resisted rolling his eyes. "Say thank you, Mother. You know you always look beautiful."

Lady Helton beamed, of course, before turning to tap her fan against his chest. "Seeing as I brought you into this world, I image you feel compelled to say that." But then she tugged him forward. "Darling, may I present Lady Caroline Rutherford, the eldest of the Earl of Standish's sisters. Lady Caroline, I'm proud to introduce you to my son, the Earl of Helton."

Lady Caroline's eyes went wide. She nearly lost her reticule when she dropped into a second, far clumsier curtsy.

And her eyes were cautious. She was as aware as he that their encounter in the park had been quite inappropriate, and played along like they'd never met.

Even if she was slightly taken aback.

He had not offered his name and would wager she'd judged him to be a member of the middle-class—perhaps a solicitor or banker.

Anything but an earl.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lord Helton." Her voice came out low and a

little breathless.

"The pleasure is all mine," he replied, taking her hand and placing a light kiss on her knuckles.

And because his mother looked on expectantly, Max cleared his throat.

"Will you dance the next set with me? If I'm not too late in asking, that is."

A flick of a glance to the card tied around her wrist summoned a delightful shade of pink to her cheeks. "I'm afraid I cannot. It's a waltz."

"You don't know the steps?" Maxwell was unaccustomed to being refused.

"Oh, I know the steps. It's just that the ladies at Almacks have yet to give me their approval..."

Ah... Unfortunate, indeed. And ridiculous, seeing as the girl was older than most debutantes—possibly well into her twenties.

"Then the next set," Max suggested. He could easily consider his duty fulfilled, but his mother looked on, and he, apparently, was a glutton for punishment.

Because this expert at all things newspaper related would no doubt subject his pride and joy to additional criticism.

Lady Caroline glanced down at the small card tied to a string around her wrist and, with a slow smile, she shrugged. "You are lucky then, my lord. There are several of those to choose from. Do you prefer a cotillion? Or perhaps a quadrille?"

She'd been hiding behind a tree, left alone by all the other guests, and yet a teasing light danced in the back of her eyes.

Max admired her spunk—grudgingly.

“Which is the supper dance?” he asked.

“A Scotch reel.”

“A reel it is, then.”

With his mother looking on, Lady Caroline held out her wrist as Maxwell removed the small pencil he always carried with him.

Her hands were small, but sturdy, and he found himself appreciating pale, soft skin while he scribbled his name on the card. “I shall look forward to it with great anticipation,” he said.

“As will I.”

He returned his mother to her friends, and spent the next half an hour making meaningless conversation with a few old acquaintances.

When it was time to fulfill his responsibility, he found her standing beside a petite girl with golden hair, laughing as though she hadn’t a care in the world.

He’d almost wager Lady Caroline had forgotten about him.

“My lady.” He bowed.

Her companion’s brows shot up.

“My lord.” Lady Caroline dipped into yet another curtsy, almost toppling herself this time—but rather than show any embarrassment, she giggled a little, the corners of her full lips turned up and her eyes amused.

Her companion closed her eyes in dismay, but Lady Caroline’s smile only deepened.

She was an interesting person, for a lady. Perhaps it was because her vitality had not been siphoned off by the endless etiquette lessons forced on

other Mayfair debs.

Taking her arm, Maxwell escorted her onto the floor. “Are you always like this?”

“Am I always this elegant and graceful, you mean?”

Had he insulted her? He supposed so, but before he could take back the sentiment, she laughed yet again.

“Only at balls. Or musicales. Or garden parties. And only in London. I am grace personified everywhere else. If this were one of our village assemblies, my dance card would have been filled a fortnight ago. You’d have to fight the men off in order to dance with me.”

Maxwell shook his head at her absurdity, but bit back a grin. He could almost like this young woman.

She allowed him to lead her to her position on the women’s line and Maxwell took his spot across from her.

He’d danced with more than one debutante this season already, just as he always did—but only out of duty. Although several marriage-minded mamas considered him good husband material, he knew better.

That being said, on this particular occasion, he found himself almost anticipating the lively dance.

Lady Caroline stood across from him, bouncing on her toes as she held his gaze.

And like a common chucklehead, he nearly grinned right back.

But before he did something so undignified as that, the music began. There would be no talking during the reel. It was far too lively for that.

And yet... his gaze rarely left her. Of all the ladies on the floor, Lady

Caroline Rutherford was by far the most entertaining.

The Scotch Reel was not an easy one. And although his partner followed most of the cues, she missed a few of the intricate steps. On those occasions, she met his eyes, threw back her head, and laughed.

She wasn't the only one who missed a few steps, but rather than laugh at themselves, other ladies and gentlemen pretended otherwise.

"A charity dance?" Baron Dankworth, an old schoolmate, quipped when their paths crossed.

"Not sure what you mean," Max answered on the way back. Even before inheriting, Archibald Beasley had been more pretentious than even Winterhope.

Max hadn't cared for him then and cared even less now.

The steps brought everyone back to their original partner and Max grasped Lady Caroline's outstretched hand. Her smile faltered, though. Of course, she'd overheard the bastard.

Without considering why, he squeezed her fingers before they separated again. She wasn't the most tactful lady, and she may have been far too bold with her opinions, but she didn't deserve to be treated so poorly.

For the most part, Lady Caroline ignored the cold stares. And she seemed to enjoy herself.

By the time the set came to an end, everyone was breathless and grateful for the intermission as they made their way toward the massive dining room where supper would be served.

"You don't need to accompany me any longer, really," she told him. "I know your mother pressed you to ask me."

“That was not a charity dance,” Max insisted.

“Surely you don’t want to be seen with someone like me, a countrified girl who also happens to be Lord Standish’s sister?”

“Not in the least.”

Shooting him the side eye, she exhaled. “If you say so.”

Max shuffled his feet and then gestured in the opposite direction. “Would you prefer to walk outside?” He had little interest in conversing with the other guests. It would be boring, as usual, and he’d found himself thinking of specific questions to ask this young woman.

She had studied the Gazette quite diligently, after all.

HE'S AN EARL!



Caroline held one hand flat on her belly, still trying to catch her breath from the furious steps of the reel.

But also from having danced it with the most handsome gentleman in the room.

He was an earl! And for reasons beyond her comprehension, he wasn't prepared to abandon her to her own company quite yet.

"Actually, a walk outside sounds lovely," she answered.

Although he looked considerably more put-together this evening, with his inky hair slicked back with pomade and the perfect fit of his tailored ensemble, there was no mistaking he was the same man she'd met in the park.

The same man she'd insulted for his choice of reading material.

Tonight, he wore a black woolen jacket, a navy waistcoat, and gleaming hessians. Tonight, he appeared one hundred percent aristocratic.

He looked magnificent.

And she ought to be intimidated. Perhaps having met him under less pretentious circumstances, looking unkempt, but also wearing spectacles, subdued her nerves.

He'd accompanied a dog wearing a pink bow, after all.

As he led her through the French doors leading to the verandah, her heartbeat slowed. Normally, the terrace would be populated with couples seeking romance or gentlemen smoking cheroots. With the midnight meal being served, however, it had emptied.

And that permitted Caroline to drop her smile and breathe normally. For a few minutes, anyway, she wouldn't have to pretend the cool glances didn't bother her. Because, although she could almost convince herself they didn't matter, the blank stares sent her way still sliced through her indifference.

They called it "the cut" with good reason.

"This is just what I needed," she admitted, happy to forgo a few bites of food if it meant she could escape the incessant censure.

"Bloody hot in there," he said. Without asking, he led her to a flagstone path that promised to meander through their hosts' garden.

"Is there anywhere more uncomfortable than a Mayfair ballroom on a warm night?"

"I cannot think of one presently."

The earl nodded as they distanced themselves from the revelry that could still be heard behind the closed doors.

Although he'd been the one to seek her out, it was Caroline who broke the silence.

"I was surprised to see you here," she offered, trailing her fingertips along the flowers.

He made a sound that was half grunt, half sigh. "I attend as few events as I can get away with."

“But you are a titled gentleman, and you have a mother,” she provided, a knowing smile curling her lips.

He whipped his head around and she thought she saw surprise.

“Indeed,” he answered.

She’d liked to believe he’d asked her to dance because he had wanted to—because he’d enjoyed talking with her in the park.

But as she’d just acknowledged, he had a mother. And his asking her to dance had no doubt been his mother’s idea.

Even so, she trusted him enough to explore their hosts’ garden together, unchaperoned.

As for her reputation, well, she doubted she could damage that more than she already had.

Caroline did not view her near ruination as being tragic, like other debutantes would. Because landing a husband was not her priority—ensuring her brother avoided murder charges was.

Even if she was graceful and elegant like the other ladies, many remained suspicious of her brother. Their family, she was coming to believe, simply didn’t belong in London.

Not Mayfair, anyway.

“Did you find fault with today’s Gazette?” he asked.

Caroline stumbled and would have fallen flat on her face—yet again—if he hadn’t such a good grip on her elbow.

Because he had remembered how she’d insulted his reading, and he was choosing not to forget it.

“My apologies, my lord. I meant no offence.” She really needed to reign

in some of her opinions.

“I think you did.” He patted her hand.

“I am far too outspoken.” No one in Mayfair seemed to appreciate honesty. Except for her own family—and her sister-in-law, Goldie.

He laughed. “I won’t argue with that. But you have not answered my question.”

“You can’t really wish to know...”

“But I do.”

“Hmm...” Caroline pondered what she’d read that morning. “I never appreciate the speculation about my brother. Especially when it’s no more than hearsay. Mr. Black would do well to check his facts before publishing such nonsense.” The Gazette had run yet another article that alluded to the former Earl of Standish’s death. But it had not simply been her uncle’s death. Her cousin, her father, and Randall, her eldest brother, had died as well.

She blinked away tears that burned the backs of her eyes when she thought of them. The pain they’d endured. The fear after realizing they were trapped.

“Your loyalty is commendable, but the magistrate wants Scotland Yard to open an investigation,” the earl pointed out. “Arson. Murder. A secret marriage. The Gazette’s publisher would be a fool to leave that out.”

“If Scotland Yard cares about the truth, they will look elsewhere.” She scowled. “My brother wouldn’t hurt a fly, let alone beloved family members.”

“Where would you suggest they look?” The earl showed his good manners by holding a branch back for her.

Caroline shook her head. It was painful to discuss the tragic events that had forever changed her and her siblings' lives, but Reed deserved her defense. "I cannot say." She recalled the sounds she'd heard outside her window the night the fire had broken out. And the unaccounted-for shadows. "But my brother is not a murderer."

She shivered.

"My apologies. I've upset you. Here." He walked the two of them off the path onto the lawn where a picturesque bench had been artfully placed.

Once seated, Caroline tipped her head back. She could only make out the half-moon. Not a single star twinkled back at her.

"I miss Breaker's Cottage," she admitted without thinking. "If we were in the country, we'd see more stars than we could count."

He'd taken the spot beside her, leaving just a few inches between them. He surprised her by studying the sky as well.

"You have the moon."

"And the flowers," Caroline added, not wanting to complain. But she couldn't help herself. "The Gazette predicted rain," she pointed out.

"It rains more often than not." He was still looking up and she watched his throat move.

She replied without thinking. "Even a broken clock is correct twice a day."

Had he really only brought her outside so they could discuss the newspaper? Or was he simply being kind? She'd declined to take supper with him.

More than likely, he had a heightened sense of duty that required he not

abandon his partner until the meal was over. A *charity dance*, just as Lord Dankworth had suggested.

But if this earl wanted to talk about the Gazette, she was fine with that.

“Perhaps the storm took a turn.”

Caroline tilted her head. “Perhaps.”

They sat in an oddly comfortable silence, watching the sky, enjoying the fresh air.

“Were you injured?”

“Walking Pip?”

It was his turn to look confused.

“When you fell,” he said.

But of course, like everyone else, he’d heard the story of her failed debut. She frowned.

“A few bruises.” Caroline edged her skirts up and held out her right foot. “I twisted my ankle but it’s fine now.” She made little rotations in the air and since they were being candid with one another, asked, “Do you feel sorry for me? Is that it?”

He turned to face her. “Should I?” With the wind lifting his hair, seated like this, he more closely resembled the man she’d met in the park.

He seemed to be studying her, and for a few seconds, the intensity behind his beautiful eyes rendered her mute.

“I’d rather you not,” she finally said.

“Why are you hiding behind trees, then?”

Caroline turned so she could see him better, but didn’t expect the jolt of

heat she experienced when her knees touched his. She chalked it up to the setting. Romantic gardens, she'd heard, led to that sort of thing.

For people who were not her.

"I have tried to fit in," she said. "But as soon as I learn what not to say, I say it. When I learn what not to do, I do it." Caroline shrugged. She'd been like this as long as she could remember. "I can't help myself."

"Why not return to your father's estate in the country, then?" It almost sounded like a challenge.

"That would be selfish of me. I have two younger sisters and if I allow them to chase me away, it'll reflect poorly on them." She laughed a little. "Melanie would likely thank me, but Josephine would never speak to me again." At his baffled expression, she went on to explain that Josephine, although only six and ten, was already campaigning to enter society the following year.

"But the middle sister is reluctant?"

"Yes. Melanie is just a few years younger than me but..." Melanie was not the same girl she'd been before the tragedy. "She's less inclined than I am." Caroline stared at her hands, clasped loosely in her lap. "And of course, I must consider my mother's ambitions for me..."

"So you are here out of duty," he said.

"Like you."

If she hadn't been watching him closely, she would have missed the slow smile that stretched his mouth.

"You, Lady Caroline, are quite entertaining," he said.

Caroline frowned. Was that a compliment or an insult?

"How so?"

He mulled over his response before answering.

"In a world where no one is who they seem, you speak your mind freely—you sweep out the cobwebs with your opinions." He lowered his gaze to her mouth. "I find your utter lack of pretentiousness... invigorating."

She would take his admission as a compliment—even if it was grudgingly given.

Grateful it was mostly dark, Caroline turned away, embarrassed and a little confused.

"I wasn't meant for any of this," she whispered, staring across the vast garden. "But everyone knows that." And why, oh why was she telling him these things? He was an earl, which made him one of them.

The *ton*.

She was never going to act like a proper lady. She was made differently than other girls her age.

"Perhaps not," he agreed without even a hint of apology. "And yet your brother is Standish. And you are here."

The stern tone of his voice jerked her back to face him.

"As are you." Because she'd been attending these blasted events for over a fortnight now and not once did she recall seeing Lord Helton in attendance.

But before she could point that out to him, he slid one arm along the back of the bench.

"Tell me," he said. "What else did the Gazette get wrong today?" He crossed one long leg over the other and Caroline couldn't help but notice how his breeches hugged his thighs and calves. Rather nicely, actually. "Surely

there was more than one error.”

He stared at her from hooded eyes. The moonlight caught the green again, and this time her heart skipped a beat.

“Why?” She’d concluded that the Earl of Helton had only asked her to dance out of pity. And then, on the heels of a few half-compliments, she thought he might be attracted to her. But he wasn’t flirting—not really.

He lifted one elegant shoulder before answering. “You’re an intelligent young woman. Consider me intrigued by all this research you’ve conducted.”

Very well... Caroline leaned forward, glanced to her left and right, and then lowered her voice. “He got the date wrong,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“The date listed across the top, just above the masthead. It was tomorrow’s.”

Rather than laugh, as she’d expected, he stiffened.

“You’re joking.” His brows lowered.

Caroline shook her head. “I wish I was.”

“You’re wrong.” He’d pulled his arm back and had both feet on the ground now.

“I almost didn’t believe it myself.”

The earl suddenly burst off the bench and began pacing back and forth.

“It’s not as though you’re responsible for it,” Caroline reassured him.

But he was beyond her comforting words. Should she apologize? But she had nothing to apologize for.

Head down, he strode from the lilacs to a cluster of prize roses, and then

back to the lilacs.

And then he stopped, turned, and offered a hand to assist her off the bench. "If you don't mind, I'll escort you back inside now."

Apparently, she'd taken her criticism too far. This elegant gentleman, a man who had made an effort to befriend her, had heard enough of her opinions.

Caroline ignored his hand. "I'm fine. You needn't bother." Her fists tightened around her reticule. "I'm more than capable of taking care of myself."

She was.

In fact, she didn't need any of these people. She would tell her mother she was tired. And in the future, she'd do everything possible to avoid events such as this.

It was time her family accepted that she was never going to fit into society.

Josephine and Melanie's images flashed in her mind followed by familial guilt.

"Don't be ridiculous." He offered his arm.

It was obvious the earl's thoughts were on something else now. Perhaps he had a mistress awaiting him across town. He acted as though he couldn't wait to rid himself of her company.

"I'm fine," she brazened. "In fact, I'm going to sit out here a little longer. Good evening, my lord." She leaned back and stared up at the sky again.

A few stars might appear if she waited long enough.

Lord Helton remained standing before her, his hand extended.

“Don’t be foolish.” He wiggled his fingers, and when she ignored that gesture, he dropped his voice. “I’ll carry you if necessary.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Oh, I would.” He cocked a brow.

It was one thing to wander in the garden by oneself—quite another to be carried kicking and screaming into a ballroom.

How had she imagined kindness in this man? He was just like the other ones—arrogant, pompous and... pig-headed.

“Very well,” she conceded.

A SCHEME



“There you are.” Caroline’s sister-in-law peered around the thick plant with curious eyes. Caroline had not been able to convince her mother to leave early, so she’d done the next best thing and found a decorative shrub to sit behind. The supper dance felt like it had happened hours ago. Surely, the ball would end soon!

“Is it over yet?”

But Goldie didn’t answer, having mysteriously disappeared. Caroline looked around, briefly baffled. She could have hugged the younger woman, however, when she returned a moment later dragging a footstool.

“My feet are killing me,” the sweet blonde woman announced before making herself comfortable.

“This is a waste of time, Goldie.” Caroline would never be accepted, and furthermore, she didn’t like most of these people anyway. Why on earth would she want to marry one of them?

“It’ll get better, I promise.”

Caroline met her sister-in-law’s stare. “Goldie, I... exposed my bare legs to everyone in Mayfair.” She would never forget how her dress had worked its way around her hips... If not for a few inches of material, she might have

shown... Caroline closed her eyes. Dear lord, it had been a nightmare.

“They’ll eventually forget,” Goldie urged her. “When the next scandal comes along.”

Goldie spoke from experience. Following a hasty marriage to Caroline’s brother, the newly married couple had existed on the outside of society for most of last year’s season.

But Reed was an earl. And Goldie wasn’t only a countess, she was also a duke’s daughter. No matter she’d been disowned for marrying Reed.

Caroline sent the other young woman a weak smile. “I don’t know if I can wait that long.”

She’d always considered herself a strong person. Growing up in the country, she’d once chased off a pack of wild dogs to protect Josephine. Caroline wasn’t afraid to swim in the river that cut across Breaker’s Cottage, nor of exploring the caves in the nearby hills. She’d even climbed the tallest trees on her father’s estate and not felt an ounce of fear.

Well, perhaps an ounce.

She had witnessed her uncle’s hunting cabin burn to the ground—knowing her father and brother were trapped inside.

But she’d never felt the ridicule of others on such a personal level and all those indifferent stares hurt more than she’d ever admit. She was getting... tired.

“If not for Melanie and Josephine, I’d go home tomorrow.” Because London was not her home. It never would be.

Goldie opened her mouth to respond but then fell silent when a couple of gentlemen stopped in front of Caroline’s tree. It did not appear that they had

been noticed, and Caroline would honestly prefer not to be.

“Standish is back in town.” A male voice on the opposite side floated through the leaves. Caroline held a finger up to her lips, her stare locked with Goldie’s.

They were talking about Reed—Caroline’s brother and Goldie’s husband.

“I don’t know how he can show his face. The blighter ought to be in Newgate.”

Goldie frowned and for an instant, Caroline thought her sister-in-law was going to jump out and defend Reed’s honor. Caroline grabbed Goldie’s hand, however, and shook her head.

“The Gazette says a new investigation is under way.”

“It’s a travesty that he’s gotten away with it for this long.”

The two men were joined by a third and they continued their ignorant speculation. Not having had the opportunity to converse with any of these gentlemen, Caroline didn’t recognize their voices.

But it didn’t matter. She’d heard others gossip along the same vein—far too often.

Nonetheless, by the time they drifted away, Goldie looked fit to be tied. And Caroline’s heart sank.

Because this sort of speculation was extremely dangerous. If the *ton* decided Reed was guilty, he might still be arrested, despite the lack of evidence. No one would care to learn the facts behind last year’s murders if they thought they already had the culprit.

“Do you know who they are?”

Goldie shook her head. “The gossip was supposed to go away,” she

whispered, looking pale. And Goldie was right. In fact, it was the initial reason Reed had married her.

He'd quickly fallen in love with his wife, of course, but his marriage had originally been arranged to distract the *ton* from their suspicions that Reed had started the fire, effectively killing off the men who stood between him and the title.

Caroline shook her head. She knew exactly what was fueling such talk—it was those blasted articles in the Gazette.

“If only the paper would let it die,” said Goldie, apparently thinking along the same lines.

“What does Reed say?” Caroline hadn't spoken with her brother about anything significant in almost a week.

“He says it will pass. But...”

“Reed understands the *ton* even less than I do.” Caroline wouldn't gloss over her brother's naiveté.

“We need to go back to Seabridge Manor, or even Breaker's Cottage. Perhaps we should wait another year...”

“No.” Caroline had an idea. As much as she'd like to head for the country herself, it was more important they put an end to the talk altogether. “We need to stop the Gazette from printing those articles.”

“What about the Sun? And the other papers?”

“If the Gazette leaves it alone, the others will as well.” Because the Gazette set the tone—in spite of the inept people running it.

“How do we do that?” Goldie's bright blue eyes flashed to the opposite side of the ballroom where Reed stood talking to a slim, tall gentleman who

was dressed more flamboyantly than most. “We need to protect him, Caroline. He doesn’t deserve this.”

“No, he doesn’t...”

“What do you have in mind?” Goldie asked.

Staring at the flames in the sconce across from her, Caroline rubbed her chin.

She had an idea—an exciting one. “If I can secure a position there, I can do something about it.” Before leaving Breaker’s Cottage and coming to London, Caroline had helped one of the local shopkeepers gather stories for a monthly publication of village happenings. Sure, the Gazette published daily, rather than monthly. But other than that, how much different could it be?”

“A position there?”

“The Gazette.”

Caroline could finally do something to help her family. She would stop the rumors from gaining more momentum and perhaps, in the process, do something to turn the Gazette into a dependable source of news.

For Lord Helton and all the other clueless aristocrats who depended on it. Because if they were going to shun someone, the least they could do is know the facts before doing so.

She was sick and tired of hearing the half-truths that were so very prominent amongst the *ton*.

“Would they hire the sister of an earl?” Goldie looked more than a little doubtful.

“He needn’t know the identity of my brother.” Caroline said.

“Mr. Black?” Goldie looked even more doubtful. “But—”

“I have to do something.” Caroline winced. “We can’t allow these rumors about Reed to get out of hand again.”

“I suppose...” Goldie’s gaze burned into Caroline’s. “But if that doesn’t work, I’m going to insist Reed and I leave London and hope that the idiom ‘out of sight, out of mind’ holds true. He’d hate it, though. He’d hate for people to think he was running away.”

“I never would have imagined my sweet brother Reed under attack like this. He’d never hurt a fly.” And yet here they were. And, unfortunately, these untruths weren’t only cruel, but they were dangerous—to Reed, but also to her sisters and mother—even to Goldie. Caroline couldn’t stop worrying about all of them. Because, if nothing had prevented some villain from killing the old earl and three of his heirs, what could keep him from killing the rest of them?

AN APPLICANT FOR HIRE



The vexing minx had been right.

Max slammed the paper onto his desk.

The date had been off on all four pages. It wasn't the worst that had slipped past him, but the most embarrassing by far.

After leaving the ball early, he'd come directly to his offices and then spent the early morning hours going over every edition they'd printed in the past month.

And God help him, he'd found multiple spelling errors, duplicate paragraphs, and on one article, the wrong headline. One would think he'd been foxed when he'd approved these galley proofs.

"Tell me." Maxwell met his managing editor's stare. "How does this keep happening?" He gestured to the papers strewn atop his desk, one hundred and sixty red circles mocking him.

Mr. Gage Wallace appeared as a typical newspaper man, with silver-streaked hair and an unremarkable face. But he was the man Maxwell trusted with not only his paper, but his reputation.

And he looked as perplexed as Max felt.

"I approved the final galley myself, Wallace." And these mistakes had

been fixed.

Or so he'd believed.

Max dropped into the chair behind his desk. Had he checked the date? It was one of the first things on his checklist. He pushed his glasses up and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"This doesn't make sense."

Wallace tugged on his ear, shaking his head. "It was late. Anyone could have missed it."

But that excuse had been used too many times already. *This could not go on.*

Max cupped the back of his neck.

How the devil had he missed these?

He'd owned the paper for a full year now, and although he'd invested heavily in modern equipment, the actual content had taken a turn for the worse.

There was a knock at the door, and Frederick Jones, Maxwell's secretary, took a tentative step inside. Jones, a tall and wiry man who looked younger than his years, handled most of their advertising accounts, but also Max's schedule and payroll. He moved around the office quietly and Max didn't know what he'd do without him.

"There's a young woman here to see you, Mr. Black," he said.

"Tell her I'm busy." He didn't need to hear from disgruntled readers at the moment. Dropping his gaze to the paper again, the date mocked him.

In Lady Caroline's voice.

Max slammed a fist onto his desk, chasing the clerk away and causing

Wallace to jump.

“Perhaps you’re too close. We all are. We could hire a person whose sole job is to proof the galleys,” his editor suggested.

“Perhaps,” Max replied. But he’d been so sure of himself. How was he going to trust anyone else to care as much as he did? His spine itched. Was there something more at play here?

Mr. Jones returned, interrupting Maxwell’s spiraling thoughts. The man was clutching his hands together, his face a dull shade of red. “She, er... refuses to leave.”

Max shot the man an annoyed glance. “Just get rid of her, will you?”

“She’s quite insistent, says you will want to hear what she has to say. And I couldn’t help but notice that she’s brought past editions of the paper with her... all marked up...” Mr. Jones flicked a meaningful glance to Max’s desk. “Like those.”

“What does she want?” Wallace asked.

“She says she is here to...” Mr. Jones shrank toward the door. “Help prevent further rubbish from being printed. I believe she is seeking employment.”

Lady Caroline’s criticisms came to mind, and if the person wasn’t looking for employment, Max would have guessed that their unwanted visitor was the young woman herself.

Wallace, meanwhile, raised his brows. “It can’t hurt to speak with her, can it?”

When Max didn’t answer right away, Mr. Jones spoke again. “She looks intelligent, for what it’s worth.”

Max flexed his fingers and then made a fist. He was in no mood to make nice today. “Tell her to come back tomorrow.”

Mr. Jones dipped his chin and backed out of the room a second time, leaving Max and his news editor to ponder their troubles once again.

True, Max could hire someone to read through the paper, but as the publisher and editor-in-chief, he was responsible for all that was printed. “Do you have someone in mind?” He pinned his stare on Wallace.

“I know of a few...”

Just then, the door opened again. But this time, it was a woman who entered—a woman who was becoming all too familiar—followed by a harried-looking Mr. Jones.

“Lady Caroline?”

Maxwell rose instinctively, his heart making an unexpected leap. He’d been more than a little rushed when escorting her back inside the night before. Because of what she’d told him... What more could she have to say on the matter?

But upon stepping into his office, she looked more stunned than he felt.

“Lord Helton?”

“I’m no lord here.” He grumbled.

“But...” She glanced over her shoulder to the door she’d just entered. “This is Mr. Black’s office.”

“How very observant of you.” Max turned to his employees. “Gentlemen,” he addressed them. “Will you excuse me a moment?”

Both his news editor and his secretary nodded agreeably, curious but also looking relieved to escape.

And when the door closed behind them, Max gestured to the chair that sat across from his desk. “To what do I owe the honor?”

She wore a similarly styled gown as she had the day they’d met, but this one was an olive green and the other had been gun-metal blue. But she was not smiling. All the blood seemed to have drained out of her face and her eyes looked darker, her expression wary.

“You are...” She didn’t sit. “Mr. Black?” She covered her face with her hands, and if he wasn’t mistaken, they were shaking. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would you have been as blunt with your opinions?”

She peeked through her hands. “I’m not sure.”

Max was almost pleased to have fooled her—served her right for offering such harsh opinions without knowing who she was offering them to.

But his intent had not been to embarrass her. And as he lowered himself into his seat, he caught sight of the error-ridden paper again.

“You were right—about the dates.” It was a damnable admission.

“Of course I was right.” She remained standing, her hands clasping a stack of past issues of his newspaper. “Unlike your reporters and editors, I double check my facts before sharing them.”

“Not always,” he said. Otherwise she’d have known he was not only an earl, but also the owner of the Gazette.

She had the good grace to wince at that.

The first time they’d met, he’d come away feeling raw—insulted. At the ball, she’d insulted him again, but also somehow managed to intrigue him...

Today, he didn’t know what to think.

And yet... her confidence hit him like a shot of good whisky.

She was nothing like any lady of his acquaintance.

But she hadn't come here to flirt with him. He scoffed, as much to himself as to her.

"My secretary said you wanted to meet with me. Was that so you could gloat?"

She was shaking her head before he finished his question. "Not at all. I've come to apply for a position."

"I already have a secretary."

"I want to be your... your *precision* editor. If you have one now, he isn't doing his job. If you don't." She shrugged. "Then it's obvious you need one." She tossed her copies of his paper onto his desk. "I'm a skilled writer, but also, if you look through these, you'll see I've an excellent eye for finding errors. If you want to rehabilitate this paper, my lord, you'd do well to hire me."

"I am not a lord here," Max snapped. He made this rule quite clear to all his employees.

She lifted her chin, and then... "If you insist."

Max ought to send her away. It would be too messy. Hiring a debutante to look for mistakes in his paper would make him the laughingstock of Fleet Street.

And yet, he was halfway to being that anyway. And it had been *her* who'd pointed out the mistake about the dates. The papers she'd brought looked to be marked up more than the ones he'd read through.

He poked his tongue into his cheek and stood up. "If you'll excuse me."

He held up one finger. "I'll return shortly."

Her eyes widened a little, but she agreed, finally deigning to take the seat he'd offered.

Mr. Jones glanced up the moment Max closed his office door behind him. "Do you want me to get rid of her?" he asked.

"No. In fact, make sure she doesn't leave. Where did Wallace go?"

Mr. Jones pointed up. "His office."

Max jogged to the stairs and then took them three at a time until he was on the floor where most of his reporters wrote up their final stories. It was empty, still—too early for any of them to have arrived yet.

Well, it was *almost* empty.

Wallace glanced up from shuffling papers on his desk, his spectacles perched on the top of his head.

"Are you going to hire her, then?"

"She's the sister of an earl," Max said. "The Earl of Standish."

"Does that matter?"

Amongst the *ton*, yes. In the newspaper business, the answer to Wallace's question wasn't as clear. Max shrugged.

"She does seem to have an eye for finding errors. At least from what I saw."

Max nodded. "She wants to be our precision editor."

"What the hell is a precision editor?"

"Just what it sounds like, I imagine. You've never heard of one?"

"Not in all my thirty years..."

Max frowned while Wallace scratched his jaw. “An earl’s sister working for a newspaper. I’ve never heard of such a thing. Standish will have something to say about it, I imagine.”

Max stared out the window. That had been his thought as well.

And yet, his primary concern was the paper.

“If she doesn’t work out you can always sack her. Unless you think Standish would take offense at that,” Wallace offered.

“I’m not worried about Standish.” Not really.

Wallace was frowning, though. “I’ve never heard of a *precision* editor.”

Neither had Max.

But...

Maxwell remembered his mother’s complaint that he needed to cover society more thoroughly, and began nodding, slowly at first, and then more vigorously. His two reporters had never taken those articles seriously.

Max could kill two birds with one stone.

“I’ve got it!” he said. And, without explaining himself, he spun around and flew back down the steps. He shouldn’t have left Lady Caroline alone for so long anyway, busybody that she was. He didn’t stop until he was at his office door, where he ran a hand through his hair and cleared his throat.

Max peeked through the glass and his brows lifted in surprise. Lady Caroline was not sitting primly in her chair, back straight and hands in her lap as any proper lady should. No, she was leaning over Max’s desk, her bottom facing the window, while she flipped through his papers as though she had every right to do so.

As though it was not a major breach of etiquette.

After taking a moment to appreciate the unexpected sight, Max opened the door almost silently. “Lady Caroline.”

Her back twitched and then she slowly turned around. The blasted woman lacked the good sense to look ashamed.

“Find anything interesting?” he asked.

“I see you’ve been busy.” She grinned at him, looking far too cheeky for a woman seeking his favor.

“I’ll hire you on approval.” It was an impulsive decision and Max hoped he wasn’t making a mistake.

But all that red caught his eye yet again, scorning him. What the hell did he have to lose?

“Do you hire all your editors on approval?”

“I only have one. And that’s not the point. If I find you useful at the end of six weeks, you can consider the position permanent.”

Her eyes lit up and before he could go on, she was clasping her hands in front of her, breast heaving as she bounced on her toes. “Thank you. You won’t be sorry. I’ll be the best precision editor London has ever known.”

“No. You won’t.” Max needed to cut her off before she ran right over him in her exuberance.

Tearing his gaze from those hands and the bosom behind them, Max scowled and moved behind his desk. “You’ll start as a society reporter.”

“A *reporter*?” Her entire demeanor changed. “A *society reporter*?”

And damned if Maxwell couldn’t relate.

“You said you could write, as well as locate errors. You’ll have half a page to fill.” And then he locked his gaze with hers—intentionally ignoring

the brilliant blue color along with her thick, sweeping lashes.

“Take it or leave it,” he said.

WHAT TIME TO YOU WANT ME?



*H*e expected her to write articles informing readers about *society*? Given any warning at all, Caroline might have kept her disappointment in check.

But he was not sending her away. No, he'd offered her a position and she would have unfettered access to the newspaper—or access, anyway. She might have to work to get that unfettered part.

“I'm not sure I'm the right person to write about society,” she said. “If you remember correctly, I'm not really privy to other ladies' conversations...” Friends. Aside from Goldie, Caroline didn't have any friends.

“You'll have to make more of an effort.” He moved a few papers around, apparently unconcerned with her objections.

“I suppose... but if people discover I'm sharing gossip for the paper, I'll stop getting invited to *ton* events.”

“You'd be surprised,” Lord Helton—*Mr. Black*—replied, a faint smirk curling his lips.

She'd nearly fainted when she'd realized that the Earl of Helton and Mr. Maxwell Black were the same person. Had Goldie known? If she had, why

hadn't she said something?

The earl had had several opportunities to tell her himself. But no. Instead, he'd allowed her to ramble on.

As a result, Caroline had not insulted a *fan* of the Gazette, she'd insulted the *owner* of the blasted thing.

A normal young lady would be embarrassed for such a misstep, but Caroline refused to be ashamed. Because she'd meant every word, and perhaps she'd done him a favor with her candor. And the night before, while walking her in the garden, had he not said he found her honesty refreshing?

And now, she would be responsible for digging up gossip.

This had better work. "It's probably best I write under a secret name."

Mr. Black slipped his spectacles on and narrowed his eyes at her. They really were the loveliest color green—like a grassy meadow in spring.

"Does your brother know you are here?"

It wasn't fair that this would be a consideration. She was a grown woman, for heaven's sake!

"He's busy, what with parliament and having a new wife. I'd rather not bother him with this."

"*Bloody hell,*" Mr. Black cursed under his breath. He was not completely comfortable with her reasoning. And if he had doubts, he might withdraw his offer.

But that wasn't going to happen. Caroline wouldn't allow it to happen.

"He won't mind if no one knows about it." He'd mind even less if *he* didn't know about it.

Caroline turned one of the papers to the page that included gossip. "We

can explain to readers that, although the Gazette's society author is a member of the *ton*, for obvious reasons, she—or he—must write anonymously.” She imagined that might make the section more interesting. “They are welcome to send in ideas for stories, so long as they can be verified. I’ll go by the name... Lady Philomena. Let them think I’m an old spinster, watching from where I sit with all the other dowagers. Why, it’s practically my civic duty—keeping all of society aware of the scandals going on in their midst...”

In truth, she hated the notion, but... She would turn it into something legitimate.

Mr. Black was watching her, and he no longer looked like he was about to send her on her merry way.

“Lady Philomena, eh?” A grin danced on his lips—lips that were too full and pink for a gentleman. Or they ought to be, anyhow. On Mr. Black, they made her wonder what they’d feel like against hers...

What was she thinking?

He wasn’t just an earl, he was also her boss. And she had no business appreciating her new boss’s good looks.

She had no business studying his slightly tousled inky hair, the chords of muscles along his arms, or his mesmerizing eyes that looked all the more intelligent from behind those silver spectacles.

And if she was smart, she would halt her appreciation there.

But Mr. Maxwell Black filled out his clothing without being overly bulky or stiff. He moved with a stealth uncommon amongst gentlemen. His shoulders were the perfect width and a smattering of black hair drew her gaze to his hands, and wrists, and forearms...

Why did she find the ink on his fingers so attractive?

She forced herself to meet his stare again. “I can start today, if you’d like.”

“That isn’t necessary.” He eyed her gown and then shook his head. “Tomorrow will be fine. In the office, you’ll be known as Miss Smith. But the byline will list you as Lady Philomena.”

Caroline nodded. “What time do you want me?”

His eyes widened. “Pardon?”

“What time should I come?” When he tilted his head, she added, “What time do the reporters come in?”

“Ah...” he said. “Noon. Most of us stay late, but you won’t be expected to.”

“Why not?”

“Because, *Miss Smith*, you’ll be haunting ballrooms in search of juicy morsels of gossip.”

Oh.

But that wasn’t at all what she had in mind. In order to block him from printing articles about Reed, she was going to need to see everything. She was going to have to be a full-fledged staff member. Not someone who drops articles off in between mingling with society.

But she’d not press her luck today.

She was going to work for the Gazette! And although she was doing this for her brother, an uncommon excitement flowed through her veins.

For the first time since they’d moved to Mayfair, she had a purpose. One that involved using her brain, one that didn’t involve dressing up like a frosted cake.

“You won’t be disappointed.” She gathered her reticule and rose from her chair. Mr. Black stood as well.

“If you don’t pass muster, you’ll be out,” he reminded her.

Caroline smirked. “Likewise,” she replied, gathering her papers up and stepping away from his desk. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” She waved.

He did not wave back.



CAROLINE DIDN’T RETURN HOME—TO the townhouse that had belonged to her father—but stopped at her brother’s house first—Rutherford Place.

“What did Mr. Black say?” Goldie leapt off the loveseat when Caroline stepped into the drawing room.

“Is Reed here?” Caroline glanced around them. She would keep her news from him for as long as she could, but she wasn’t fool enough to believe he wouldn’t find out eventually. That being said, she’d prefer he find out after her trial period at the Gazette had passed—after she’d proven herself.

“He’s in bed still. We didn’t sleep much.” Goldie didn’t meet Caroline’s eyes while imparting this information, and Caroline was happy for that. The very last thing she wanted to hear about was her brother’s prowess in the bedchamber.

In fact, just the thought was enough to make her wince.

Besides that, she had a bone to pick with her sister-in-law.

“Were you aware that Mr. Black and Lord Helton are one and the same?” Caroline asked.

“Of course. I’ve been able to recite the contents of Debrettes since I turned twelve. Ask me anything.” The delicate blonde woman lifted her chin

in mock seriousness. “It’s a rare talent, I know.”

Caroline rolled her eyes toward the ceiling and then did her best to look disapproving.

“I wish you would have shared that tidbit with me before I asked him for a job.” Caroline didn’t think it necessary to tell Goldie how she’d disparaged the Gazette when she’d met up with him in the park.

“If you’d bother to read it yourself, you wouldn’t be caught off guard. Was that a problem for you?” Goldie drew Caroline to sit on the loveseat beside her. “What are you wearing? That’s an atrocious color!”

Caroline glanced down and gritted her teeth. “I wanted to fit in.”

“Ah...” Goldie met Caroline’s gaze, not bothering to hide her amusement. Because, of course, Mr. Black knew who Caroline was. “Did he hire you, though?”

“He did.” Caroline had accomplished what she’d set out to do. “You are looking at the new Society Reporter for the London Gazette.”

“Society? You?” Goldie’s expression looked so taken aback that Caroline couldn’t help laughing.

“I tried convincing him I was better suited to any other position, but it was all he was willing to offer me.” Goldie quirked an eyebrow. She didn’t look any less incredulous. “What? Don’t look so surprised. Am I not a proper lady?” The moment Caroline spoke the question, the catastrophe that had occurred the evening she’d come out flashed in her mind—and how she was mostly ignored at *ton* events—except by Goldie and her mother, of course. And a few other young women so long as their mothers weren’t about.

Lady Helton had been kind enough...

She hurried to add, “Actually, I think this might be ideal for our purpose. But I’m going to need your help.”

“I’ll say.” Goldie smirked and shook her head.

“I’ll be writing under an assumed name: Lady Philomena. The other reporters are going to know me as Miss Smith.” The hush-hush nature of the position suited her just fine. “But I’m going to need help with story ideas.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. Just last evening, I heard the Earl of Northwood was courting Lady Amelia. But her father is looking higher. He has his eye on the Marquess of Winterhope. That’s not even the juiciest part, though. Lady Pembroke swears that the earl is actually in love with Lady Amelia’s cousin—Miss Buckingham, an impoverished relation who acts as her chaperone.”

Caroline blinked, not quite comprehending all that Goldie just said. Even so... “Can you verify the facts?” she asked.

“He was seen at Tattersalls with Lady Amelia, and of course, Miss Buckingham was present, but—”

“I cannot print anything unless I’m one hundred percent sure that it’s accurate.”

“In the *gossip* section?” Goldie looked as though Caroline had sprouted a second head.

“Allow me to clarify—I *refuse* to write anything unless I can verify that it is accurate. I’ve been thinking about this all the way back from Fleet Street. If the society page is a source of news people can trust, Mr. Black may well be moved to adopt this practice in the other sections as well.”

Goldie was nodding and looking quite approving. “And if people trust the society page, they will trust articles you write when you have proof of Reed’s

innocence.”

“Exactly. And if I cannot convince Mr. Black to stop printing bad things about Reed in the other sections, I’ll write good things about him in mine.” Goldie nodded slowly and Caroline folded her hands in her lap.

“When do you start?”

“Tomorrow.” Caroline made an exaggerated expression of horror but quickly turned serious. “I know. But I’m ready to do this. And the sooner we clear Reed’s name once and for all, the better.”

Goldie had already pulled a paper and pencils out from the small cabinet beside her. “Lady Chaswick is hosting tonight’s ball.” She scrunched up her nose. “What kind of proof do you need?”

“Facts. Evidence.” Ever since she’d begun finding errors in the paper, she’d been thinking about the best way to verify stories. “The best proof, of course, is documentation. Remember when the paper erroneously reported that one of the teachers at Miss Primm’s had married Viscount Bloodstone? I realize she did marry him eventually, but that announcement would have been easily debunked if the reporter had just bothered to check the church registry.”

“I doubt there will be a registry of Lord Northwood’s lady friends,” Goldie pointed out.

“True. And in the absence of anything official, one must find other evidence to support the rumors. For instance. Who did he dance with, and how many times? Was he seen walking through the garden with anyone? If so, by whom? And how long? If we gather a significant amount of documented witness accounts, the case for the rumor becomes stronger—not all that different than what Scotland Yard does,” Caroline said with a grin.

But then she sobered quickly. Her reasons for doing all of this were entirely serious, after all. “We need to listen for the usual gossip, of course, but also what’s being said about Reed. If I am discovered... I am discovered. It’s not like I have much to lose. You do realize I’m not really looking for a husband...”

“Are you sure?” Goldie didn’t look convinced.

“Positive.”

Goldie studied Caroline, and then, shaking her head, relented. “All right... Still. You need to be careful.”

“It’s just a job, really. All I need to do is fill the society page.” Or half-page, as it was. For now. Before long, it would be a full page. Because Caroline didn’t set out to do anything in half-measures.

“We’ll both be careful.” Goldie nodded in approval. “I don’t know how you come up with these schemes. Although, I suppose I should be grateful...” She winked at Caroline.

Caroline smirked.

“Someone has to protect my idiot brother—”

“He isn’t an idiot, Caroline.” Goldie took umbrage at the insult to her husband.

“And that, Lady Standish, is why I love you so much.” Caroline put her arm around her sister-in-law. “But to me, he’s a lovable idiot who needs someone to defend him.”

With the deaths of their family members, Reed had resisted becoming Standish at first, and he’d remained silent when faced with a barrage of accusations.

“Does he still have the nightmares?” While they’d all resided at Rutherford Place, before Reed had wed Goldie, Caroline had caught her brother pacing the grounds late at night. The deaths had tormented him. More than once, he’d admitted to feeling like an imposter.

These rumors couldn’t be helping any of that.

“About once a week,” Goldie answered. “He says he’s gotten used to them, but he doesn’t fool me. And that’s precisely why we have to put these rumors to rest once and for all. If they knew him, they’d realize their suspicions are ridiculous.”

“If they only knew him...” Caroline waited for the pieces to come together in her mind... “That gives me an idea...”

A NEW SOCIETY WRITER



“Malum’s office?” Max shook hands with Twitch, one of the two guards at the back door to the Domus Emporium.

“They’re meeting in the red lounge this afternoon, Mr. Black,” the second of the two massively built guards answered.

Max dipped his chin and they stepped aside.

He could have entered through the front entrance. The gossips of the *ton* hadn’t yet figured out they’d have an endless supply of fodder by watching the comings and goings at the discreet but famous establishment.

Or perhaps they didn’t really want to know...

It wasn’t that Max hadn’t been tempted to take advantage of the complimentary membership the duke had granted him. The ladies who worked at the Emporium were not only beautiful, but intelligent.

But with his mother in town for the season, along with the issues he had with the paper, he wouldn’t have time to do more than a quick poke. And that simply wasn’t him.

Waving a greeting to a few of the ladies, he marched past the stairwell that led upstairs and wove his way to one of the private sanctuaries hidden beyond the elegant gaming room.

As he entered the small but comfortable seating area draped and decorated with heavy red curtains and velvet cushions, a hand landed on his shoulder.

“We were just talking about you.” Leopold Beckworth’s meaty paw squeezed. “*The date*, Black. Really? Who gets the bloody date wrong?”

“You’re being sabotaged.” This comment came from Malum himself and Max hated that he felt his ears burning.

“It’s the only thing that explains it.” Winterhope spoke up from where he and Baron Westcott sat shuffling cards for a game they’d never play.

Because these meetings served a greater purpose. Whenever possible, the five men shared information to help one another prevent a few immoral members of the aristocracy from trading opium to fill their coffers, stocking up on tea in the process—tea acquired illegally.

As a result of this alliance, the small group helped one another when circumstances called for it.

Like when Max had ‘helped’ Standish avoid serving time in Newgate, and then later, when Westcott ran off with the woman who’d jilted the Duke of Dewberry.

They would do what was necessary to help Winterhope if the trouble at his stables persisted.

“Whoever is behind this needs to be stopped.” Beckworth frowned.

“I read through every word myself.” Had he been careless?

Malum leaned back, looking deceptively relaxed. Max knew better. The Duke of Malum’s energy was almost a palpable thing. “Who else has access to the frames?” he asked.

“The composers—all six of them. The press operators. The mechanic. Wallace. Jones. Pip and Michaels.” Hell, it wasn’t as though the press room was off-limits to any of his employees. “I thought operations would be smooth sailing once we replaced the old Stanhope Press.”

Upgrading from the slow hand press to a steam-driven cylindrical one had been Max’s first priority as publisher. They’d been able to triple their circulation, with a good deal of repairs and adjustments. If Max and his mechanic could make the process into a continuous one, they could put out ten times as many copies as they had this year.

“You could hire a few watchmen,” Westcott spoke up this time. “The culprit is too consistent to make this attack random.”

“I’d wager *The Times* is behind these mistakes. The prospect of lining one’s pockets can cause people to compromise themselves in ways you’d never imagine.” Winterhope tapped the deck of cards on the table. “Last week I had no choice but to fire my top jockey for cheating.”

Westcott frowned. “Was he the one who brought in the hemlock?”

Hemlock not only killed horses, but could kill humans. The deadly plant had popped up in two of Winterhope’s fields the prior year.

“No,” Winterhope answered. “I’m fairly certain that was an accident. But I discovered the little fiend approached my stable master. I have two horses who look almost identical—except on the track. Both are red. Both have white socks. *Rue’s Favorite* has won seven races this season already, but the other one, *Lion’s Kiss*, comes out looking fast, but falls off at the finish. This little bastard wanted to enter *Lion’s Kiss* but actually race *Rue’s Favorite* and he needed Jackson’s help to pull it off.”

“If that got out, Winterhope Downs would lose all credibility,”

Beckworth said.

“Precisely.” The marquess raised a glass to his mouth, flicking the lace on his wrist as he did so. Of all their group, Winterhope was not only the best-dressed, but he was also the cleanest and most wholesome. As far as Max knew, the marquess had not once taken advantage of his membership at the Emporium either.

“Perhaps you’re the one who needs watchmen,” Beckworth suggested.

Beckworth was as comfortable dealing with gangs on the docks as Maxwell was in his offices. Westcott fell somewhere in between, and Malum was the only known duke who had ever been shunned by London Society.

In public, at least.

Westcott placed his cards facedown and crossed his legs. “Doyle easily could have paid off one of your composers.”

Dropping into a high-backed velvet seat, Max rubbed his neck. Kyle Doyle had owned *The London Times* for over two decades. He’d been decent enough to welcome Max to Fleet Street shortly after he’d taken over the Gazette, but Max suspected the other publisher had simply wanted a closer look at his competition.

“I suppose,” Max said. “But it could just as easily be someone from the Morning Chronicle, or the Herald, or the Post.”

“A watchman ought to be able to solve your problem.” Beckworth punched one hand into the other. “I can spare a few men this month.”

Max contemplated the offer. Beckworth’s men were known to break a few rules themselves—but also a few bones. “I might take you up on that.”

But not yet.

“These mistakes are not random.” Malum wrote something down, pulled the bell pull, and handed it off to the servant who appeared almost immediately. “Take care of this for me.”

As usual, the enigmatic duke provided no explanation. Often, in such cases, this was better for all concerned. Max was startled, however, by the duke’s next question.

“What was Standish’s sister doing at the Gazette’s offices this morning? You aren’t courting her, are you?”

Max shouldn’t have been surprised. Malum stayed one step ahead of pretty much every person he had any dealings with. It was impressive, but disconcerting when it was *Max*’s business under that kind of scrutiny.

“Good Lord, no,” Maxwell answered instinctively. Although, the thought didn’t repulse him the way he’d expect. “I hired her to write the articles for my society section.”

“Are you referring to those four little paragraphs you’ve set aside to announce who’s hosting the latest ball?” Winterhope smirked.

These men didn’t need to hear that a debutante had been documenting his every mistake over the past year. He’d been humiliated enough by the error with the damn dates.

“It was my mother’s idea.” Only a slight fabrication.

This was met with more than one snicker.

“Couldn’t you find someone who didn’t fall down the stairs at her own come-out?” Winterhope grimaced.

“Such as?”

“Pittsguard has a sister,” Beckworth suggested, waggling his brows.

Maxwell responded with a scowl. He'd never met any of Pitt's family, but if the marquess was anything to go by, he'd rather not.

Westcott leaned forward, looking thoughtful. "It might keep the chit out of trouble," he suggested. "Remember, it was Lady Caroline who encouraged Standish to double-cross you and marry Lady Marigold rather than her elder sister."

"Lucky for you," Winterhope nodded toward Westcott. Because the baron had eventually gone on to marry the elder sister himself.

"That *was* her, wasn't it?" Maxwell could barely remember. Likely, because he'd been changing out printing presses at the time—not an insignificant undertaking. But it sounded about right. Standish might think his sisters were sitting at home crocheting, but the eldest of them, anyhow, wasn't the sort to embrace the superficial life of an average debutante.

Not when she had Maxwell Black to torment.

He had not appreciated being on the receiving end of that particular deception. Even if it was one of many other articles he'd printed that made him look like a fool.

"I've hired her on a trial basis," he clarified. "If she doesn't work out, I'll let her go."

Malum turned back to Max. "Standish isn't aware of this... arrangement." It was not a question.

"That's between the two of them." But the second he spoke the words, Maxwell realized that as *Maxwell Black*, publisher of the Gazette, this might be true. But as the *Earl of Helton*, a supposedly honorable gentleman, the statement lacked honor. "Blast and damn," he muttered.

"She may not even show. I've never heard of a society deb entering

employment unless she is forced to.” Winterhope smoothed some lint off his trousers as he spoke.

“Wait a few days before speaking with Standish. If she doesn’t work out, the problem will resolve itself.” This from Westcott.

Maxwell didn’t want to go to meet with the earl—because although Lady Caroline’s brother had, in fact, been backed into a corner, he had also double-crossed Max.

All because the Gazette’s newest employee had suggested it.

Perfect.

Given time, however, the issue could take care of itself, and yet... Lady Caroline had not seemed like the fickle sort. No. She may not have taken the *ton* by storm, but she’d had a gleam in her eyes when she’d looked around his newspaper offices.

Maxwell didn’t trust it.

NATURE OF THE BUSINESS



“*F*eel free to take any of these.” Mr. Wallace directed Caroline to a handful of small tables across from his own much larger desk, all upstairs from Mr. Black’s office.

Caroline nodded, opening her satchel in which she kept notes of the story ideas she and Goldie had discussed along with the list of mistakes she’d discovered in that day’s paper. But as she claimed one of the tables, nerves she’d ignored up until that moment slammed into her.

What did she know about running a newspaper? Nothing! That was what. Sure, she’d helped put together the country press, but that had been only once a month, and the paper had only been a single page, front and back. Mr. Thistle had used a small printer and never distributed more than thirty copies.

Caroline’s involvement had been limited to providing bits of information here and there for Mr. Thistle to either print or not print.

But the Gazette was London’s most popular newspaper, consisting of four massive pages published on a daily basis!

She glanced down at today’s edition and inhaled a deep breath to calm the panic urging her to retreat. She would ask questions. She would learn.

She could do this. Because Reed’s life might be in danger—not to

mention the other members of her family.

But before she could approach Mr. Wallace for any instructions, Mr. Black appeared on the landing.

From behind silver-rimmed spectacles, his emerald gaze immediately found her.

“Miss Smith,” he said, and Caroline glanced behind her before remembering they’d decided she wouldn’t go by her real name while at work.

“My—Mr. Black.” She’d nearly ‘my lorded’ him but he had corrected her the day before. He was not one of the prospective husbands her mother had pointed out and this wasn’t a morning garden party. She was here to work, and this man was her boss.

“Good morning.” She spoke politely.

He didn’t smile or return her greeting, but he didn’t ignore her either. And standing beside her table, he dropped today’s paper on the corner and then shuffled his feet. “I suppose you saw them,” he finally said.

“Them? You mean the errors?” Caroline’s thoughts jumped to the notes she’d taken while sipping her morning tea. “As a matter of fact, yes—seventeen to be exact—including punctuation.” And because she couldn’t help herself, she added, “At least the dates are correct.”

“There is that.” His mouth twitched.

Mr. Black’s tone wavered somewhere between irritation and amusement, reminding her of her oldest brother Randall. He used to sound just like that whenever Rupert would tease him, acting as though he merely tolerated their cousin’s antics. More than once, however, Caroline had caught him fighting back a smile.

Both of them were gone now, had been for over a year. Even after all this time, the grief could still take her by surprise, little reminders like physical blows she had to shake off.

The fire had robbed her family of nearly everything.

She couldn't think about that now.

He pointed to the other tables. "There are two other reporters. You'll meet them later."

But... "Why aren't the other reporters here yet?" she asked.

"They're meeting with their sources—vetting today's stories."

"And where do they find these sources?" Caroline knew that she'd get her stories from society, but where did the other reporters find theirs?

"Mostly pubs. Michaels checks in at Scotland Yard."

"Do they always frequent the same establishments?" Caroline's pencil poised over her paper. "And how does that work, exactly? Do they just sit and wait...? Or—"

"You needn't concern yourself," he said. "I doubt Standish would appreciate me sending his eldest sister out to the worst of London's pubs." When she didn't respond, he halted and slid her a wary glance. "Have you told him yet? Tell me you've told him."

"I'm my own person." She lifted her chin. She'd once kept her father appraised of her activities but that had been before the opium... and before the fire. "I haven't been beholden to anyone for years. Besides, I explained this when you hired me, my brother is busy with his *earlish* duties, what with parliament and other... responsibilities."

Mr. Black just stared at her. And then he sighed. "Has Wallace given you

the tour yet?”

Her heart jumped. *This*. This was what she needed. “He has not. But I would very much appreciate—”

“I’ll take you about.” He nodded, as though agreeing with himself.

The shadows beneath his eyes were even darker than they’d been yesterday. And his hair was rumpled, springing out as though he’d run his hand through it multiple times.

She almost felt sorry for him.

“Do you work through the night?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Nature of the business.” He lifted both brows. “If you’re finished making yourself at home...” He spun little circles in the air with his right hand. Caroline pushed her chair out, and, making sure she had a pencil and paper, she shot up before he changed his mind.

“I’m ready.”

Mr. Black kept right on moving to a door at the back of the room. “The printer is on the main floor. But supplies are kept in here.” He opened it and Caroline peered inside. It was a large closet filled with ink, paper, and at least a thousand different pieces of metal. Without knowing for certain, she’d assume they were spare parts for the printing press.

“Why don’t you keep all this in the print room?”

“We had some flooding last summer—nothing major, but everything is safer on this floor. I’d bring Matilda up here if that was even possible.”

Matilda? Who was this Matilda person and why was it impossible for her to come upstairs?

Needing answers to other, more pertinent questions, Caroline refrained

from asking.

For now.

Mr. Black ran a hand along one of the shelves, and Caroline was willing to wager he knew the name of every single piece, along with how it worked and where it went.

“Do I turn my articles in to you?” she asked.

“Only if necessary. Wallace handles most of that.”

“Are there only two reporters, then?” She quickly changed the subject. “Plus me?”

He nodded, and not for the first time, Caroline wondered why he wasn’t addressing *his* earlish duties. What drove a gentleman, an earl, to take on the massive challenge of running one of England’s biggest newspapers?

“Wallace handles initial edits,” he said as they began their descent.

“And who proofs those?”

“Whoever is available and can read and write, but at the end of the day, either Wallace or I proof all galleys before the printers start up.”

Galleys?

She wasn’t sure exactly what those were, but even so, she pinched her lips together and barely refrained from rolling her eyes. Because—obviously—he and his editor weren’t doing a very good job of it.

“I know what you’re thinking.” He glanced over his shoulder. “On nights you aren’t required to do your debutante thing, you may come and proof as well. But I don’t imagine that’ll be often. These days, it seems there’s some ridiculous festivity thrown almost every night for your set.”

“It’s your set too,” she pointed out.

He grunted but continued down the narrow staircase. He didn't seem to appreciate the reminder, so she returned to their original topic.

“What's a galley?” Caroline asked.

“The first page printed after the type has been set. We use the old Stanhope press for the proof. Once it's been looked over, the pressmen get on with the run.”

“I imagine all that happens late at night.” Which likely explained why he looked tired all the time.

He dipped his chin.

“How late, usually?” Caroline asked.

“Anytime between midnight and dawn, depending on how the paper comes together.” They'd arrived at the landing, but rather than head towards his office, Mr. Black led her through a hallway that opened into a large open space. Tall windows lit the area, which contained several tables, but those hardly signified. Because two printers took up most of the space. A small one, similar to what Mr. Thistle had used in the country, and another one that was absolutely massive.

A vaguely familiar scent permeated the air—a unique combination of ink, cleaning liquids, and paper. It was oddly invigorating.

“This is the press room.” For the first time since meeting this man, he looked relaxed and... *proud*.

Which brought Caroline up short. Because all things considered, she'd never met a nobleman who didn't carry his arrogance like a banner.

Why was he so different?

“The first thing I did when I bought the Gazette was retire the old

Stanhope iron hand press and replace it with Matilda here.”

So Matilda was the printing press. “Huh,” she said.

He rubbed his hand over the massive piece of machinery almost lovingly.

No—not almost. The puzzling man before her did, in fact, stroke *Matilda* as he called it—her? —with uninhibited affection.

“A hand press like the Stanhope is limited to about four hundred pages an hour, and that’s only if the press operators don’t hit a snag.”

She moved closer to the press to get a better look, but Mr. Black held up one hand, stopping her.

“She looks innocent enough now, but if you don’t know what you’re doing, she can be dangerous.” He held her gaze, ensuring she listened to him. “Don’t touch her, is that understood? Better yet, don’t even get near her.”

Caroline dipped her chin. “Yes sir!”

“I’m being serious.”

“Don’t touch Matilda. Got it.” She took a step back. “How many papers can it—can *she*—print at once?”

“Over twice what the Stanhope can do.” He moved around the gigantic cylinders to where pulleys and chains moved through a maze of wheels. It was taller than both of them, and took up as much space as a small carriage. With each step, he touched some piece of the machine, as though testing it—reassuring himself. “More if the compositors can keep up. But this is only the beginning. Brilliant minds are working every day to increase printing capabilities.”

“What exactly is a compositor?” Caroline wanted to appear capable, but she couldn’t do that if she didn’t know how all this worked.

Mr. Black led her to the opposite side of the room where several pedestals stood in a row along the windows. “They set the type.” He lifted out a plate, and then gestured for her to examine the two cases of drawers. “This one up here holds the upper-case letters, the lower one, holds the—”

“Lower-case letters.”

He nodded, and standing beside him, Caroline would swear she could feel his excitement as he continued. It felt familiar to her own.

“Do you ever get bored with all of this?” She doubted she would.

He paused. “No. The mistakes have been frustrating, but selling thousands of papers—spreading news around the world.” He shook his head, looking almost awestruck. “It’s unprecedented.”

A tingling spread from her spine to her limbs. She might very well be the luckiest lady in all of Mayfair. Because she was a part of something so much bigger than herself.

“Even the best compositor can only set about two thousand characters an hour,” he continued. “But that’s about to change. There’s a group of Americans who are working on a machine that will set each character with the press of a button. They’re also working on a revolving press. It’s only a matter of time before we can print thousands of papers a night. If the typesetting can be streamlined, publications could be ten, even twenty pages long.”

Mr. Black continued explaining how the steam engine was activated with the pull of a chain, but after that, relied partly on its own momentum. He showed her the ladder where the pressmen stood, the reservoir where the ink was applied, and also the platform where paper went in and came out. Caroline felt overwhelmed, but gradually began to understand how so many

newspapers could be produced in so little time.

Still, she couldn't help but think...

“Forgive me, Mr. Black, if this is too forward, but...” She trailed her hand across a table that stretched almost the length of the room. “Why would you want to print more papers when you can't get the ones you have right?”

IT'S BACKWARDS



Maxwell jerked his chin around to stare at his newest employee. Of course this woman would ask that. He'd send her a cutting glance of disdain, but rather than meet his gaze, she was scribbling notes in the small book she'd withdrawn from one of her sleeves.

He could chalk her initial lack of restraint in disparaging his paper up to the fact that she hadn't known who he was. After she'd discovered his identity, however, she hadn't exactly changed her tune.

"The more papers we distribute, the more money we can charge for advertisements. The more we can charge for advertisements, the less we have to charge for the paper itself—which increases distribution, making it so more people can be informed. And that, in turn, allows us to charge more for ads." It was a relatively new concept and he found himself feeling defensive—something he wasn't used to, especially with young women—*impertinent* young women. True, he'd found her pretty and intriguing at their first two meetings, but all that was changed now. If she expected to remain in his employ, she was going to have to learn to keep her opinion to herself.

"But." She wrinkled her nose—a nose that would be classical if it didn't tilt up at the end. "Won't advertisers care that the content isn't accurate?"

"It's bloody accurate," Maxwell grabbed a nearby cloth and wiped one of

Matilda's handles, irritation buzzing through him. "Mostly."

"Hmm." She hummed and approached one of the iron frames where the copy had been removed but the typesetter had left some ad graphics in place. Lady Caroline leaned forward and two lines appeared between her eyes.

"It's backwards," she observed. "It's like trying to read in a looking glass."

"That's why we proof the pages on galleys." Maxwell shoved his hands into his pockets. Torn between his desire to defend himself and hear what she had to say, he hesitated but then turned around and grabbed one of the sheets they'd proofed the night before.

"Have a look," he said, holding it out for Lady Caroline to take. She immediately set it on a table and smoothed it flat.

He hadn't expected her to actually read the stories, nor had he expected her to compare it with the notes she'd taken in that little book of hers.

She did both.

And while she focused on yesterday's stories, Maxwell fiddled with Matilda. It had taken weeks for him to learn all the workings of the impressive piece of machinery and he'd nearly lost a digit more than once. But working with and watching the invention at work was one of his favorite aspects of owning the Gazette.

Noticing that one of the pins was loose, he donned a pair of gloves and went about adjusting it. After that, he tightened a few others. And then he oiled one of the handles.

Several minutes passed before she interrupted his concentration.

"This doesn't make sense," she said.

Maxwell glanced up, conflicted because he liked the timbre of her voice, but he dreaded what else she might say.

“What?”

“This line.” She pointed at one of the paragraphs that had been marked incorrect. “It’s circled here but was never corrected. Do you have the original, the part you put on the printer?”

“The form?” Maxwell removed the gloves and joined her at the table. “Forms are emptied after a run so the type can be cleaned and put away.”

But Maxwell immediately recognized the sentence she had indicated. “I proofed that myself—It was corrected.” Hadn’t it been?

He turned to the table where they discarded all the galleys and, finding it empty, touched his chin. The line, along with a misspelled headline, had both been fixed, but that proof was nowhere to be seen.

The calm he’d felt while working on Matilda ebbed away.

Meanwhile, Lady Caroline had removed a folded copy of this morning’s newspaper from that puffed sleeve of hers and was opening it beside the galley proof.

“See...”

Maxwell didn’t need to see.

“Right here,” she said, pointing to the offending column. And then she had the temerity to give him a pitying look. “As you’ve said yourself, it was late. Perhaps you were just tired.”

But Maxwell had not been tired.

Blast and damn.

He didn’t have time to deal with this chit right now. He needed to speak

with Wallace. And Michaels and Pip.

“I’d be more than happy to stay—”

But he was shaking his head. “I want you to attend Lady Mann’s musicale.” Maxwell had visited with his mother over breakfast and when she’d hassled him again about not covering society, he’d assured her he would have a reporter there.

Aside from the gentlemen he met with at the Emporium, along with Wallace and Jones, his mother was the only person who knew he’d hired Lady Caroline.

His mother was good at that—at keeping secrets, that was.

“I can come help after,” Lady Caroline offered.

Maxwell took a moment to imagine this woman dressed in a gown made up of billowing sleeves and layers of skirts. Carnage was sure to ensue if she came fluttering around while the press was running. The scenario was a horrifying one.

“You’ll do no such thing.”

He expected her to argue but instead, she fussed at her sleeve. The sun slanted through the windows, showing all the different mahogany tones in her hair. When she lifted her lashes to hold his gaze, Maxwell nearly forgot what they’d been discussing.

“Will you be there?” Her confidence seemed to falter. Did her eyes look a brighter blue than normal? “At the musicale?”

“I avoid that sort of thing.”

“But you attended the Darlington’s ball.” It was practically an accusation.

Maxwell removed his spectacles and used his handkerchief to remove the

smudges he'd made while working on the press. "Against my better judgement."

"Hmm," she answered thoughtfully, leaving Maxwell feeling curious.

Curiosity was common for him. He was a newspaper man, after all. But it wasn't something he'd ever experienced while conversing with one of Mayfair's ubiquitous misses.

And he found himself keeping silent, waiting for her to elaborate.

"I don't understand," she finally admitted. "You seemed to enjoy yourself the other night." She licked her lips. "I'd imagine anyone who dances as well as you would enjoy mingling in society."

"What does one have to do with the other?"

She shrugged and, rather than answering his question, surprised him yet again.

"You are Mr. Black," she said. "But you are also the Earl of Helton. Not even my brother, who never wanted anything to do with my uncle's title, goes by his given name."

Maxwell made a scoffing sound. "Good for him."

"Why haven't you taken your place in parliament?"

He refused to answer that one.

"Is it true you never visit your country estate?"

"Are you interviewing me for a story?" Maxwell demanded.

"Of course not. Unless you want me to?"

This time, he only shook his head. She might make a good reporter, after all... She certainly had the tenacity of one.

“Did your father go by his title?”

He wasn't about to discuss this with her. “Don't you have stories to write?” Maxwell glanced around.

“Oh, yes.” Her eyes flew wide and she took a step away from him. “A new orphanage is being built by the docks, and I thought I might cover some of the fund-raising efforts—perhaps acknowledge the more generous patrons.”

“That's fine. Wonderful.” Maxwell stared at the press, clenching his jaw.

But before she disappeared into the stairwell, she turned around. “Mr. Black?”

“Yes?”

“You're sure you won't be attending the musicale this evening?”

It was a mistake to look over—to meet her stare. Because her blue eyes damn well nearly mesmerized him. She tilted her head, causing a strand of hair to escape and curl along the base of her neck. Maxwell swallowed hard.

She looked all too appealing and a little forlorn.

“I suppose miracles happen.”

Her mouth stretched into a smile that rivaled the flickering lights that reflected off Matilda when she was running at full capacity.

“In that case, I shall hope for a miracle.”

LADY MANN'S MUSICALE



Caroline sat in the third row from the front as they waited for the announcement to signify that the musicians were prepared to begin their performance. The rows in front and behind her group were noticeably vacant.

Because Caroline had tumbled down the steps at her own come-out. Because no one wanted to associate with the girl who'd flipped her skirts up for the whole world to see.

Caroline marveled that the invitations hadn't ceased coming in altogether.

"Did Reed agree to make the donation?" she whispered.

"Oh, yes." Goldie looked even prettier than usual in a royal-blue silk that matched the color of her eyes. Goldie's older sister, the Baroness Westcott, sat on her opposite side conversing with Caroline's mother.

The two young women were daughters of the Duke of Crossings, but both had been disowned for marrying beneath them. Caroline glanced between them. Although both women had blonde hair and lovely blue eyes, their similarities ended there.

Goldie was pretty, plump, and effusive whereas the older girl, Baron Westcott's wife, was taller, slim, and kept her opinions to herself, possessing an almost ethereal beauty.

She loved her younger sister, however, and would do anything to protect her. That was all Caroline cared about.

“Does your sister know?” Caroline whispered by Goldie’s ear.

“Some, not all. Telling Nia would risk Baron Westcott knowing as well. And if Westcott knows, we can’t be sure he wouldn’t tell Reed.”

Goldie lifted her chin, indicating Reed’s presence across the room, involved in what looked like a serious conversation with Lord Westcott and a second gentleman—a marquess, if she remembered correctly—one who not only dressed with flair, but was almost as handsome as he was beautiful.

Baron Westcott and Reed had known one another for as long as Caroline could remember, having met the first year they’d entered school.

“Good thinking,” Caroline agreed.

“Oh! Also, I thought you’d like to know—I added three other charity events to his schedule after you left today.”

“Perfect.” And it was, so long as people knew about these donations—and they would—because Caroline would make sure they did by writing about them for her society section.

Without consciously doing so, she found her gaze constantly sliding to the entrance... hoping... wishing...

Mr. Black had said he only attended *ton* events when it was absolutely necessary—for his mother’s sake. It was why Caroline hadn’t recognized him as a gentleman that day in the park.

She should not expect him. He had more important work to do.

And yet, she inexplicably found herself looking around the room for her employer’s glowering face.

After he'd finished his tour and then excused himself, Caroline had taken a few hours to familiarize herself with the rest of the newspaper's offices. She'd waited a short while for the other reporters to return but had been disappointed.

Mr. Black never returned, and apparently the other reporters weren't expected until early in the evening.

By the time the clock struck four in the afternoon, Mr. Wallace had insisted she go home. He assured her that she could turn in her story about the musicale the following day.

Caroline had hoped she'd accomplish more, but with nothing to do, with nothing yet to write about, she had packed up her notes and walked back to Mayfair.

Rather than return home right away, however, she'd instead visited her sister-in-law so the two could further develop part one of Caroline's plan for rehabilitating her brother's reputation.

Which involved ramping up his benevolent efforts. Because... why would a person disparage his name when he might make a sizable donation to their favorite charity?

Goldie would orchestrate his donations and Caroline would ensure they were all mentioned in her society articles.

Caroline forced herself to face front until she felt the entrance of Lady Mann's grand music hall open again. She instinctively pivoted just in time to see Lady Helton step inside.

And she was not alone, but escorted by her son, Mr. Black. *The Earl of Helton.*

Caroline's heart leapt for no reason at all.

An older-looking couple greeted Lady Helton while Mr. Black's emerald gaze lazily searched the room. Gone were the spectacles and rolled-up sleeves from earlier that morning, along with his unshaven jaw and tousled hair. Tonight, a skilled valet had transformed Maxwell Black into an elegant earl once again, dressing him in a suit that, although not as elaborate what the tall man with Reed wore, stood out just the same.

Wearing mostly black, but for a pristine white shirt and cravat, Caroline's employer was easily the most handsome man in the room.

And, similar to his demeanor at the ball a few nights before, he looked bored.

Until his gaze landed on Caroline.

His eyes narrowed. Was he checking up on her? She had encouraged him to attend, heck, she'd begged him to attend, but now that he was here, she couldn't remember why.

"What's he doing here?" Goldie whispered from beside her. "Because we haven't told Reed yet and we cannot afford a scene..."

Caroline was already rising out of her chair. "I'll handle him."

Wishing she felt as confident as she sounded, she edged her way out of their row, smoothed her skirts and, ignoring the whispers that seemed to follow her wherever she went, strode toward Lord Helton and his mother.

"My dear Lady Caroline." Lady Helton smiled. "What a pleasure to see you here this evening." Her tone came out so warm that Caroline had to force herself not to glance around.

Because hardly anyone spoke to her with such kindness—not in Mayfair, anyhow.

“My lady,” Caroline curtsied. “I’m quite looking forward to tonight’s performance.”

The countess winced and then laughed before tapping her son’s arm with her fan. “You remember Maxwell.” The gleam in the woman’s eyes was a knowing one.

Caroline shifted and held the earl’s stare. He lifted a brow and shrugged.

Of course his mother knew.

He’d mentioned her more than once, hadn’t he? In fact, Caroline suspected he might not have hired her at all if his mother wasn’t so involved in society.

“How could I forget? My lord.” Caroline curtsied again, showing more grace than she normally did.

He, in turn, bowed over her hand. “*My lady.* Would you care to take a turn around the room with me?”

“But the performance—”

“Won’t begin for another half an hour at least,” Lady Helton supplied. “And once it does, you’ll wish it hadn’t.”

“Oh?”

Rather than allowing his mother to elaborate, the earl tucked Caroline’s hand over his arm and was already steering her toward a row of roped-off paintings, walking at a snail’s pace, similar to a few other couples around them.

She felt all the stares yet again, only this time, rather than landing on her with contempt, they held curiosity and something else...

Jealousy?

Surely not approval.

“I haven’t told my brother yet,” she blurted out her concern since he seemed to be walking them toward Reed and his companions.

“He’ll find out eventually.”

“Yes,” Caroline admitted. “When I’m ready.”

“I hope that’s soon.” Nonetheless, he changed direction so they instead arrived at the refreshment table. Looking distracted, he handed her a glass of lukewarm lemonade.

When he gestured toward the trays filled with small pieces of cheese and bread, she declined.

“I nearly broke a tooth on the bread when we first arrived.”

If she wasn’t mistaken, the corner of his mouth jerked, as though she’d nearly caused him to smile.

It was ironic how some members of the *ton* went to great lengths to show up their contemporaries but usually skimped when it came to the drinks and food they served.

“What did your mother mean when she said I’ll wish the performance hadn’t begun?”

“You haven’t attended many recitals, have you?” Mr. Black drawled.

The earl, she noticed, took one sip from his glass and immediately discarded it.

“This is my first in London,” she admitted. “But I enjoy the music played at the balls and garden parties.”

Caroline wondered if she should remove her hand from his arm.

Again, that little tick along his jaw. “You enjoy it because those are *paid*

musicians.”

“But this is a performance. Surely, they wouldn’t be performing if they hadn’t practiced—”

“Trust me.” He laughed softly. “You’re critical enough of the Gazette. Let’s see what you have to say about Lady Mann’s daughters.”

“Oh...” Caroline inhaled and almost lost her ability to think rationally when his subtle, spicy scent teased her nostrils. She was saved when a smattering of activity caught her attention at the front of the room.

Three young women of varying ages were arranging themselves on the small dais, removing stringed instruments from leather cases, obviously related if one went by their looks.

Surely, they couldn’t be as bad as all that.

Caroline felt her eye begin to twitch. She had actually been looking forward to the performance and yet she’d promised herself she would only write the truth. And the girls seated on the small stage, well, they were much younger than she was, and they were quite brave to play for such an esteemed audience.

What was Caroline going to write if they performed poorly?

She watched as the chairs began filling up. Lady Helton had been joined by the Duchess of Crossings and in a surprising turn of events, they’d made themselves comfortable in the row behind Goldie and her sister.

Which, considering the duke had disowned them, was interesting indeed...

“There’s your first story.” Mr. Black spoke softly.

“What do you mean?”

“I already know the headline. *‘The Duke of Crossings’ women reunite at the Mann sisters’ recital.*”

“That isn’t even close to the truth, and I refuse to sign my name to that kind of gibberish. Why... they simply took the best seat available.”

“What will you write, then?” He challenged her.

“The truth. I will always write the truth.”

“Hmph.” He didn’t sound impressed.

But this was the gossip section they were talking about, and if she wished to keep her job, she was going to have to keep it entertaining.

Forgive me, Goldie.

“...It isn’t a falsehood if the headline asks a question. *‘Has the Duchess of Crossings reconciled with her daughters?’*”

“There you go.” He chuckled softly, causing an unexpected flush of warmth to wash over her. Caroline had only ever sought the approval of three men—her two brothers and her father.

She hadn’t expected to find pleasure in Mr. Black’s approval.

Her gaze trailed around the room until it landed on Goldie and her sister, both of whom were turned around in their seats, smiling and laughing.

With their mother.

“I’m not sure I should write it, though,” she said. If she wrote that story, Goldie and Lady Westcott’s father would learn they’d spent time with their mother. The Duke of Crossings wasn’t the sort one wanted to cross unless necessary.

“Why the devil not?”

“If the Duke of Crossings thinks the duchess wants to reconcile with his

daughters, if he even thinks she's providing them comfort, he's like to put a stop to it. And Goldie misses her mother terribly. I can't imagine being cut off like that." Her family was everything to her!

She felt Mr. Black's stare—this time, disapproving.

"That isn't our problem, my lady." Before she could argue, he'd turned his attention to just beyond her shoulder. "Don't look now, but your brother is approaching."

Not now, Reed!

She would have moaned if she'd had time. Instead, her mind raced to come up with some excuse—any plausible reason for standing alone with the Earl of Helton.

Caroline turned just in time to meet her brother's questioning eyes.

"Reed!" She welcomed him with what was most likely a too-bright smile, snatching her hand off Mr. Black's arm.

But she wasn't quick enough, and Reed's stare flicked from her hand to her face—and then to Mr. Black.

Neither looked happy.

"I believe you are acquainted with the Earl of Helton?"

Reed dipped his chin. "Black."

"Rutherford."

Caroline glanced between them, the air suddenly thick with a palpable tension.

"I didn't realize you had been introduced to my sister." Reed's comment was more of an accusation, really.

This was why she wasn't keen on letting her brother know about her plan.

She had no doubt he'd want her to have nothing to do with the newspaper owner—not after being blackmailed by him a few weeks after the fire and reading the latest gossip last week.

Little love existed between these two.

“Lord Helton claimed the supper dance with me at Lady Darlington’s ball this week.” Caroline tried to meet her brother’s gaze, but it was firmly locked with Mr. Black’s.

Please don’t make a scene. Please don’t make a scene.

“With my mother’s approval, I hope?” Reed’s fists clenched at his side and Caroline suddenly imagined worst case scenarios between these two. Such as a fight breaking out before the music could begin—or her brother challenging Mr. Black to a duel.

A public skirmish would not help Reed’s circumstances when it came time to convince her employer to refrain from printing any of the horrible and untrue allegations rippling through the gossip mill.

Caroline held Reed’s stare meaningfully. “Of course he had Mother’s approval. He is an earl,” she pointed out. “An earl who was kind enough to partner with me for *the supper dance*.”

It took a moment, but Reed eventually caught her meaning.

But just in case he did not, Caroline claimed Mr. Black’s arm once again.

Only when Reed’s brows shot up did she realize her mistake.

“Indeed?” Reed met Mr. Black’s stare again—this time with an altogether different expression. Because since coming out, no one had asked Caroline to dance without being coerced first.

“He’s an excellent dancer,” she added, turning just in time to see her

employer roll his eyes toward the chandelier hanging above them.

She thanked her lucky stars that Reed missed the exasperated look.

“Well then.” Reed straightened, turning to address Mr. Black directly. “You should have come to me first—before taking it upon yourself to court my sister.”

The arm beneath her hand tensed.

“Oh, but he isn’t—We’re not—” Caroline stuttered.

“This is between me and Black, Caroline.” Reed’s voice carried a stern tone she wasn’t used to. So much had changed since he’d become Standish!

Caroline turned to her employer, hiding her face from her brother as she mouthed an apology.

“We’ll discuss this later, Rutherford,” Mr. Black answered Reed, apparently equally intent on ignoring her.

“But he’s not—”

“I’ll be at home tomorrow morning,” Reed cut her off.

Caroline huffed, her irritation growing. What was happening? “That *won’t* be necessary,” she inserted crossly.

Both men finally turned to her.

“It won’t be necessary,” she repeated herself, this time with gritted teeth. She touched her brother’s arm. “Honestly.”

Reed looked uncertainly between them. “I—”

“Welcome!” Caroline was saved from a possible scene when Lady Mann stepped onto the dais, waving her hands before clearing her throat. Loudly. “Welcome! Now, if everyone would please find their seats, the recital will begin momentarily.”

The announcement could not have come at a better time.

Goldie appeared and took Reed's arm. "Come sit with me, darling."

As Goldie led her husband back to the chairs, Caroline let out a relieved breath—though she noticed he'd claimed her spot.

"Your brother obviously doesn't agree." Mr. Black whispered near her ear, and rather than be outraged by his comment, she allowed herself to be distracted by his warm breath on her skin.

She liked it.

"Does he?"

"Excuse me?"

"That you are an independent lady who doesn't require her brother's protection."

"Be serious," Caroline scoffed. "You needn't meet with him."

Mr. Black removed his spectacles and began cleaning them with his handkerchief, rolling his eyes at her for the second time that evening while he did so.

"Really," she added. Dear lord, why did men have to be so confrontational?

"We'd best take a seat." Mr. Black didn't argue further, but began walking her toward the seating area. And since they'd waited until the last minute, the only place left was the front row.

Lady Mann's three daughters took up their bows, looking as focused and serious as any professional Caroline had seen.

Mr. Black nudged her elbow with his, and then whispered, "Brace yourself."

Caroline smiled but shook her head. *How bad could they be?*

It didn't take long, however, for her to realize that Lady Helton had had the right of it, and Caroline flinched when the most awful racket she'd ever had the misfortune to hear began right in front of her. Within five seconds, Caroline wished it was over.

“Now you see why I don't attend these things?”

“Hush,” Caroline whispered back to her companion. The chairs weren't all that large, and Mr. Black's thigh pressed against hers. And every time he whispered like that, heat shot to her core.

The night was going to be a long one, indeed.

TELLING STORIES



Discordant notes still ringing in her ears, Caroline happily climbed into her brother's carriage behind her younger sister and her mother following the conclusion of what would have been a very painful performance if she hadn't been so distracted by Mr. Black sitting beside her.

Trying to ignore that kind of awareness, she'd quickly learned, was exhausting.

At least the ride home was a short one.

"That wasn't at all what I expected," Caroline declared as the driver pulled their vehicle into the slow-moving traffic. Her mother sat beside her on the front-facing bench while Goldie and Reed sat together across from them.

"My lady's maid warned me," Goldie said. Away from the large manor where lights had been set up along the front, shadows danced in the darkness inside the carriage.

That made it easier to avoid her brother's eyes. And that worked all the way until they arrived at their home, as she sat waiting for her sister and mother to step out onto the pavement.

"Come to the house tomorrow afternoon," Reed ordered Caroline as he

dropped a kiss on her cheek. “The two of us need to talk.” His voice came out level but the look in his eyes wasn’t.

The last time the two of them had discussed Maxwell Black, Reed had been facing prison. Somehow, her dunderheaded brother didn’t realize he was facing that possibility again.

Even if she wanted to meet with him, however, she couldn’t. She had a job!

“He was merely being kind when he danced with me. You needn’t punish him for extending the courtesy.”

“You know what kind of man he is.” Reed’s voice was low.

“Well, he asked me to dance when no other gentleman would. That ought to tell you something about his character.”

Reed merely grunted, and even in the dark she could see the warning in his eyes. Thankfully, they were already stopping.

“Goodnight, Reed,” she said, waving his concern away. “Goodnight, Goldie.”

“Sweet dreams,” Goldie called out.

Caroline held her sister-in-law's stare, wishing she could talk to her alone. “You too.”

Later, although Caroline’s eyes drooped when she climbed into bed, her mind raced, keeping her up until the early morning hours.

Mr. Black was going to expect her to mention that the duchess had sat with her daughters. He’d said the consequences weren’t her concern.

It was the truth, she reasoned. And if she didn’t write about it, the duke would likely hear it from somewhere else.

And this was her job...

This was different from the gossip that had been written about Reed—because that had only been speculation. And the speculation was all lies!

The duchess and her daughters had spent time talking with each other at the musicale. Furthermore, Caroline had overheard them making plans to meet later this week—at the Minerva Lending Library.

The other story she couldn't ignore was that not one of Lady Mann's daughters were musically inclined. Musicales fell under the heading of *ton* events. But was a critique of such a performance even newsworthy?

Did it even matter?

Caroline had made a mental list of the members of the *ton* who'd been forced to endure the performance. She had stories to write, but still, she felt uneasy. As she mulled it over, Caroline turned over and punched her pillow. She would only write the truth. People had a right to know the truth, didn't they?

After giving up on sleep completely, Caroline rose, struck a flint, and by the light of three flickering candles, sat down at the small desk in her chamber and penned the articles she'd all but written in her mind.

She would have thought she'd get some sleep afterward, but her hope had been in vain. Before leaving for the newspaper offices much later that morning, the glance in her looking glass revealed dark circles under her eyes.

Despite her obsession with the Gazette's mistakes, Caroline had read other newspapers. The Society Page in those papers wrote entire articles covering balls and critiquing the female guests' appearances. They never failed to point out if a lady looked particularly lovely or particularly bad.

And of course, they'd all included articles describing the scandal of her

come-out. They'd even exaggerated the debacle, something she would not have believed possible.

Were those the sorts of thing she'd ever resort to writing about? She winced at the thought.

But she was the society author. If she didn't write about these things, somebody else would be hired to do so.

"Good morning, Miss Smith." Mr. Jones barely looked up as she walked in.

"Is Mr. Wallace in yet?"

Mr. Jones gestured behind him—to Mr. Black's office.

All in all, she'd written seven different articles, and she was anxious for the managing editor's feedback. She'd also circled twenty-three errors in this morning's edition—mostly small ones—two glaring untruths.

"Might as well go in," Mr. Jones told her.

Two days ago, she'd marched in without permission—today, she belonged here. Not allowing herself to hesitate, she opened the door and stepped inside.

Conversation between the two men came to a jarring stop.

"I'll just make those changes then, sir." Mr. Wallace slipped past Caroline.

"Oh, but—" The door closed behind the editor before Caroline could stop him, leaving her alone with Mr. Black.

He didn't rise to greet her, but he did lean forward in his seat. "What do you have there?" he asked as his stare dropped pointedly to her notes—and her marked-up copy of the paper. Caroline approached his desk, where she

spread the newspaper out, smoothing it beside an identical copy.

“They’re worse on nights when I have other obligations.”

“But you came back here last night, didn’t you?” In fact, he’d left the musicale during intermission. Caroline had barely restrained herself from begging him to take her with him.

He looked up and cocked a brow, emerald eyes twinkling from behind his spectacles. “Are your ears recovered yet?” The smile that followed was unexpected, as was the effect it had on Caroline.

How could something so seemingly benign send such a powerful rush of... excitement and joy shooting through her?

“Not yet. I imagine they’ll be fully functional again by the end of the season.” She grinned, dropping into the chair Mr. Wallace had vacated. But when her gaze landed on the two error-ridden papers, she turned serious again. “If it’s any comfort, neither my mother nor either of my sisters are bothered by the mistakes.”

“But they noticed them.”

“They did,” she confessed with another apologetic wince. “At first, I thought the characters might be getting jumbled—accidentally—in the printing process.”

“That’s not possible.”

“Right. Because they’re locked into place, but also because the mistakes aren’t just missing or wrong characters—entire words and sentences are incorrect.”

Maxwell Black leaned back, removed his spectacles, and pinched his nose.

“I know.” He exhaled, and she realized that although he’d removed his jacket, he wore the same clothing he’d worn last night—his waistcoat halfway unbuttoned and his shirtsleeves rolled up. With his hair mussed and a shadow of whiskers along his jaw, he more resembled the gentleman she’d interrupted in the park last week than one of Mayfair’s lofty aristocrats.

She took a deep breath.

“Someone is sabotaging your paper, Mr. Black,” she announced.

He glanced up, not bothering to hide his frustration.

“You knew, didn’t you?” she asked, though it was more a statement than a question.

He dipped his chin. “I was hoping the mistakes could be attributed to some process we were skipping—or something mechanical. But it isn’t.”

“No.”

He rubbed the back of his neck and then with a sigh, held out his hand. “I take it you’ve stories to show me.”

So he didn’t wish to discuss the problem any further—Caroline supposed she could understand that. But then she looked down at the sheets of paper she’d brought with her, the lines upon lines of her own elegant handwriting.

Unusually self-conscious, Caroline hesitated. “Mr. Wallace hasn’t read through them yet.” But Mr. Black had his hand out, so she handed them over anyway. She’d read enough newspaper articles that she knew what was required. Even so, she’d hoped another pair of eyes would check for mistakes before Mr. Black saw them, especially after her own comments on the errors in his paper.

He slid the spectacles on again, and as he read, he made a few marks but

slowly nodded.

While he focused his attention on her stories, Caroline found herself studying the man himself. Things she normally wouldn't study on a gentleman.

Such as his mouth, which was pink and full. As he read, his tongue peeked out to lick his bottom lip, which he then bit down on with a row of straight white teeth—except for an incisor which sat a little sideways. Then there was his jaw...

Caroline's fingertips itched to see if the short black hairs making up the shadow of Mr. Black's beard were as stiff as they felt, if the skin beneath them was much different than hers.

It certainly looked different—tighter and weather-worn.

She then noticed how long his lashes were, thicker than a man's ought to be, but part of his compelling good looks.

Caroline squeezed her knees together.

His nose, which looked like it might have been broken a time or two, only increased the growing attraction she had for him.

As did his wrinkled linen shirt and the ink on his fingers.

He glanced up, catching her.

Feeling heat ebb up her neck, Caroline flicked her gaze to the coat rack behind him, trying to think about anything other than the man seated before her.

Ignore him. Ignore him. It wasn't as though he could read her mind.

A fob-watch dangled from his jacket, providing her with another topic to dwell on: her plans for the day.

Later that afternoon, she'd promised Goldie she'd attend the fundraiser for the foundling hospital. Fortunately, she wasn't required to attend any festivities that evening.

As per Caroline and Goldie's plan, Reed had agreed to make an exorbitant donation. It was a worthy cause—a massive old, abandoned warehouse that had been cleaned and the spaces turned into dormitories and classrooms. Tuesday's Choice, a new foundling hospital on Wapping Street, provided a safe home and education for over a hundred children at any given time. Some of the orphans were as young as four or five, abandoned to their own devices, who'd formerly had no choice but to turn to thieving for the gang bosses. Some were nearly grown men who simply needed guidance in order to lead meaningful lives.

Today's particular fundraiser consisted of an art exhibit, set up in the large dining hall at Tuesday's Choice, organized by Lady Tempest and the Duchess of Cockfield. Half of the pieces for sale had been donated by popular artists, the other half by wealthy families. The queen herself had promised a donation that would match the proceeds of the sale.

Never comfortable with too much silence, Caroline squirmed. Mr. Black had been silent for several minutes now.

"You spend an awful lot of time here," she said, embarrassed to have been caught watching him so closely.

"I'm afraid it hasn't made much difference." His answer brought her mind back to the business at hand. "These aren't bad, though." He hummed and flipped to the next page. "Not bad at all."

"I did my best to match the style of the previous articles." At his grimace, she added, "But not the inaccuracies... obviously..." She trailed off, her little

attempt at a jest falling flat.

He didn't like discussing the problem, but it wouldn't do any good to ignore it.

He was only hurting himself, and for reasons she wouldn't explore, Caroline didn't want to watch him continue doing that.

"Of all your employees, who do you trust the least?" she asked. She'd yet to meet his reporters, or anyone other than Mr. Wallace and Mr. Jones.

"That's the trouble. The pressmen have worked for the Gazette for decades and the compositors came highly recommended. I've no reason to distrust any of them."

Caroline nodded. "In that case, the only person you can really trust—is me."



MAXWELL LAUGHED. "You think so, do you?"

Lady Caroline wiggled her shoulders in answer—delicate shoulders. She wore a prettier gown this morning, one that didn't button up to her chin and was made up of a blue muslin that nearly matched her eyes.

After the recital last night, Maxwell had stopped into the Emporium. It was something he did a few times a week, just in case Malum had any tips to share or new information regarding the illegal tea trade they thwarted whenever possible.

After going over a possible developing situation with the duke and discussing their next step, Max had returned to the newspaper offices much later.

He'd returned too late.

New mistakes ran through every page and all but one stack had already been delivered to posting stations for the mail coaches to collect, the City Division Post Office on Lombard, or the Westminster division over on Gerrard Street.

Another banner day for the Gazette.

“Why should I trust you?” He didn’t disagree, but he wanted to hear her reasoning. He’d discussed the mistakes with his colleagues and also with Wallace. They depended on the Gazette for their livelihoods, so of course they should want to see it succeed, but ultimately it was Maxwell’s responsibility to maintain the paper’s reputation and keep things running smoothly.

This managing young woman, however, seemed more invested than his own managing editor. But why? Oddly enough, although he shouldn’t, he already trusted her.

“I am an outsider,” she announced. She didn’t even have to think to come up with an answer. “All those mistakes,” she added, “Happened when I had nothing to do with the Gazette.”

Maxwell stared at the delicate handwriting on the pages before him. Not only did she have a flair for writing, but she was also right about the mistakes. Would his other reporters even take her seriously?

“I’ll be attending the fundraiser at the foundling hospital on Wapping Street this afternoon.” She broke into his thoughts. “I’ll bring that story by later.”

“I don’t expect you to be here at night.” Nor should she plan on it. She was the sister of an earl and needed to behave as such—even if that earl had come across his title under questionable circumstances.

“I don’t have anywhere else to be.” She spoke softly and Maxwell remembered how the guests at the Darlington’s ball had left her standing all alone and how she’d been given the cut direct by several at the musicale last night. She had tripped and fallen at her own come-out, but that was not the only reason society hadn’t made her feel welcome. No, it would always come back to that fire and people’s suspicions about her brother’s part in the events leading to his becoming Standish.

“I suppose you can help proof the galleys, if you’d like.” Only because he felt sorry for her.

Her eyes widened. “I would.” She began gathering her belongings—her copy of the paper, her stories, and a small pencil. “The fundraiser shouldn’t last long, and I can write about it here.”

Watching her hands—graceful and thin, but efficient—Maxwell was reminded that although she was his employee, she was also a lady. He could give her a hand as she stood. He could open and close the door for her.

Because despite knowing better, the world knew him as a gentleman. “If you come tonight,” he said, “Find me before you leave.” He’d see that she made it home safely—not out of duty but because he was a damn decent human being.

It wasn’t safe for women to be gallivanting around London at night on their own. Not even women as fiercely independent as this one.

He’d left his seat behind his desk and stood beside her, offering his hand.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said. “I don’t want to be treated differently than your other employees.”

But it was too late for that. He would never have attended a musicale to check on any of his other reporters. And if he’d had a choice, he would have

insisted his society writer had more experience.

Considering these facts, Maxwell had to remind himself why in the hell he'd hired her.

She had shown herself to have a good eye. And although he hadn't been looking to hire a society writer, he probably ought to have been. In the past, he'd depended on tipsters who'd sell the latest gossip and then have one of his reporters organize it into a coherent article.

Those stories had been written in a lackluster manner. They had lacked Lady Caroline's flair.

She was not only intelligent, though. She was also a lady—who was not unattractive.

In an office filled with nothing but men.

Which meant Maxwell was going to have to treat her differently, as were his employees.

She was going to need protection.

Fergus and Crenshaw were both nearing their sixties, so he wouldn't worry about them, and he was fairly certain two of his composers lived together—as a couple. The other men, though...

Yes. She was going to need protection.

I HAVE TO PRINT IT



This just might work.

Caroline read through her article about the fundraiser one last time before turning it in to Mr. Wallace.

Reed had been perfect that afternoon. Not only had he handed over a very large bank note and purchased two paintings, but for the first time in her life, Caroline had witnessed her brother actually charm people. He'd made small talk with the donors, complimented the hospital staff, and most impressive of all, he'd met with several of the children to offer encouragement and they'd all seemed quite cheerful afterward.

Raised to be a land steward, Reed had always mocked such niceties in the past, valuing work above all else. Something had changed, and Caroline attributed the change to Goldie's influence.

She'd spent more time on this article than the others. Because this one actually mattered. In writing it, she'd imparted not only Reed's generosity but the good work being done there. She'd included the address where ongoing donations could be sent.

Perhaps the society page didn't need to consist of meaningless drivel, after all. She could use it for good.

“Do you have that last article for me to look at?”

Caroline glanced up. She was so caught up in her work, she’d not heard the managing editor come in. “Right here.” She stood, handing it over.

She rubbed her hands together, anxious to watch the printing press in action.

When she’d first returned, the office had been mostly quiet. But in the hour since she’d sat writing her article about Tuesday’s Choice, she’d heard the vague greetings from downstairs as others arrived. The clangs and clacks of active machinery reached her from the floor below, along with the distant chatter of the workers, almost soothing in the way it all blended together.

Without acknowledging her again, Mr. Wallace drifted back to his own desk.

There was nothing else to do but go downstairs—something she’d actually been anxious to do—so why weren’t her feet moving?

Her innards did a little flip.

She wanted to see how the paper was actually made. She wanted to watch the compositors at work and begin reading over proofs. Unfortunately, that meant meeting new people. And the last time she had been forced to meet a roomful of new people, she’d made a ninny of herself.

It’s not the same.

She touched the corner of her eye to keep it from twitching while she tried to think of what she would say to her co-workers. As a member of the *ton*, she wasn’t supposed to acknowledge anyone without an introduction. But this wasn’t a ballroom.

It was a workplace.

Footsteps tapping in the stairwell warned her someone was approaching. She straightened her shoulders and ran through her best introductions. *Hello, I'm... who was she? Not Lady Caroline. Oh! Miss Smith—Miss Caroline Smith.*

Should she provide her first name? *How do you do? I'm Mr. Black's newest hire. No. Pleased to meet you. I'm the new society writer, Miss Smith.* Yes. That sounded appropriate.

Facing the door, she twisted her mouth into what she hoped looked like a confident smile.

But it was not one of her co-workers.

“Are you coming down?” Mr. Black’s stare was more knowing than she’d like. She only held it for a second, shaken by the way her heart jumped.

“Yes. Um.” Caroline glanced at her desk as though she’d been looking for something. “I was just...”

“We’ve plenty of pencils downstairs.” He folded his arms across his chest and slouched against the doorframe. “You’re nervous.”

He knew. And since he knew, she didn’t bother trying to deny it. “Obviously.” She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. “I’m fine when it comes to meeting with just a few people... but groups...” Caroline winced. “I can’t help but worry I’m going to do it again.”

“I thought you only embarrassed yourself at *ton* events.”

“Yes, well. It’s not just the *ton*. It’s more about familiarity. Unfortunately, I’ve tremendous practice at making a fool of myself when I’m... new. The first time it happened, I was attending a house party at my aunt and uncle’s country estate.”

“Seabridge Manor?”

“Yes. Have you been?”

“Are you going to finish your story?” He wasn’t impatient now, although it might be better if he were. “You were saying...?”

“Very well.” Caroline exhaled. “Yes, the house party was at Seabridge Manor—a magnificent place I’d only heard of up until then.” Caroline remembered how excited she’d been when she’d learned she had been invited to join her parents and brothers.

The memory would be funny if she hadn’t come out looking so poorly. “It was a very special day—I think it was my aunt’s birthday. Anyway, adults and children alike were all invited to dine beside the lake—and there were dozens of us. We were told to line up on the dock if we wanted a ride in one of the rowboats. There were other girls, but they didn’t want anything to do with me. Oh, but I wanted a ride so badly.”

“How old were you?”

“Almost five and ten. When it was my turn, I tried to curtsy to the older boy helping me into that little craft. He was one of my cousin’s friends and did not deserve his fate that day.”

“You knocked him in...”

“But that wasn’t enough. No, I fell in after. Nearly drowned the poor thing.” Even now, she remembered the embarrassment of being pulled out by her father, wrapped up in a blanket, and dragged inside. “Everyone hated me after that and, as a result, I spent the rest of the week by myself. Mind you, my aunt and uncle didn’t invite me back for several years.”

“No one rowed you around the lake?” Mr. Black almost looked angry on her behalf, which wasn’t at all what she’d set out to do.

“No, but that was a long time ago. I barely remember it.”

Caroline winced.

Because she was telling all this to *Mr. Black*—her boss, a man she needed to impress! “You don’t want to hear this, though.” Sucking in a gulp of air, she found the courage to meet his gaze. “Ignore all that. Please.”

All he did was raise his brows. And then... he held out a hand. “Come on, then. I’ll introduce you.”

Staring at his palm, she wondered if he really meant to lead her downstairs as though she was a child.

“I won’t trip and fall around the press. I promise.”

He remained standing there, waiting.

“I’ll be fine.”

“I know.” But he hadn’t moved.

Oh. Well. Alright then.

Caroline cautiously rose.

Unlike when they had danced at the Darlington’s ball, neither of them wore gloves. She could hardly do so while writing, and she wouldn’t expect him to be so formal at his own business.

Which placed her bare hand in his.

In that second, all her brain focused on the place where they touched.

His palm was dry and warm and surprisingly comforting. He didn’t thread their fingers together but wrapped his around hers collectively. The pressure was firm, enough so her hand wouldn’t slip away, but not so tight that she couldn’t escape if she wanted to.

Which she didn't.

But in the thirty seconds it took to lead her to the stairwell, her heart had lodged itself into her throat. Her lungs could no longer draw in the proper amount of air.

"How are you going to introduce me?" she asked. Her voice sounded breathy and weak even to her own ears.

"The usual way." *Was he teasing her?*

"Don't forget. I'm *Miss Smith*, remember?"

"Got it."

Of course he remembered. He'd suggested the name, hadn't he? Caroline could hardly think while his sturdy hand engulfed hers. And trailing behind him, she eyed the way his hair curled at the back of his neck, the width of his shoulders, and how his torso tapered down to a trim waist and firm backside.

This was not good! *Control yourself, Caroline.*

Maxwell Black was her boss and he was also the man who'd once blackmailed her brother. Her eye twitched as the sound of metal clanking against metal grew louder. When they arrived at the main floor, he pushed the door open and dropped her hand.

Much better. She could breathe again.

So why did she feel unmoored?

"Remember what I told you about the press." He dropped his hand on her shoulder, drawing her closer to Matilda.

Two men were working on the printing press. The one standing on the tall platform sent her a suspicious glance before leaning in to tighten a screw, but the second pressman's attention remained locked on the giant rolling

mechanism, his attention unwavering as he turned a handle.

“Fergus and Crenshaw,” Mr. Black said.

Caroline nodded.

Mr. Black slid his hand down her back and he steered her past the compositor’s stands. She couldn’t help but be impressed watching their hands fly from the frame to the various drawers, using metal grabbers to place letters and characters at a pace she never would have expected.

No wonder there were so many errors.

A quick perusal of the room confirmed she was the only woman.

Her employer led her past the typesetters to a long table. She recognized Mr. Wallace and Mr. Jones, both of whom were reading through what she presumed was tomorrow’s edition.

Two other men, neither of whom she’d been introduced to, exchanged smirks from where they sat at the far table.

“That’s Michaels and Pip.” Mr. Black shuffled his feet. “Everyone who can, proofs the galley. The more eyes, the better,” he explained, and Caroline nodded. He had told her the first thing he’d done as publisher was to bring in the new printing press. It was the same time the errors began showing up.

She shivered and Mr. Black sent her a curious look.

But she couldn’t help herself.

Because both she and Mr. Black had concluded the mistakes couldn’t be caused by mechanical malfunction, which meant any of the workers present could potentially be the Gazette’s saboteur.

A much younger-looking fellow chose that moment to slide a large page onto the table. “Here’s your copy, Mr. Black.”

“Excellent.” He glanced down and then tipped his head in Caroline’s direction. “Miss Smith, this is Link, our press boy. Link, say hello to Miss Smith.”

“Hello, Miss Smith.”

“Hello, Link.” Caroline made a little wave.

“Bring Miss Smith a fresh galley, if you don’t mind,” Mr. Black said, and then drew her right along to where the two reporters were working. “Michaels, Pip, this is Miss Smith, the society writer I told you about. She’s going to be helping proof the galleys.”

“Pleasure to meet you both.” Caroline stretched out a hand, and she got the feeling neither would have shaken it if the boss hadn’t been standing over them.

Less certain of herself, she laughed. Both looked to be nearing their fifties, with dark hair and ruddy skin. Whereas Michaels was almost as tall as their boss, Pip’s height was closer to Caroline’s.

And before she could stop herself, she addressed him, laughing. “We have a border collie called Pip.”

“How serendipitous.” His tone came out flat, proving she’d made a mistake to compare him to her brother’s dog.

Meanwhile, Mr. Black was acting like one of her mother’s footmen, pulling a chair out from the table, either unaware of the other employees watching him, or simply not caring. “You can work here,” he told her.

Why would he bother calling her by a different name if he was going to treat her like a lady anyway?

Mr. Black gestured toward the chair a second time, but with the others all

watching, Caroline ignored it and pulled one out for herself.

Caroline was going to have to have a talk with her boss because she'd never be accepted by the staff if she got preferential treatment.

Link dashed back over with the requested galley, and then Mr. Black leaned down beside her. "Give the ink a few minutes to dry properly."

"I can manage. Thank you." Sitting self-consciously, she straightened the galley in front of her, careful to only touch the edges. The very large page would be folded in half, making up the four pages of the paper, but even with eight different columns and the small print, she recognized her stories.

Her stories!

She'd loved helping Mr. Thistle, but this was so very different. Nothing could have prepared her for the pride she felt seeing her words in print in a London newspaper.

Buzzing inside, she plucked a pencil out of a tin cup, and then realized Mr. Black was watching her.

She very deliberately did not look up and a minute or so later, he finally left the table in favor of his press.

Matilda. The notion that he would name his printing press, a monstrosity of metal, ink, and grease, had a smile dancing on her lips.

She spotted two errors in the society section and informed Mr. Wallace, who nodded approvingly. "I'll give this to Fred. You start on the Scotland Yard section," he told her and then crossed to where the compositors worked.

Caroline liked this. She not only felt useful, but she felt like she was a part of something special.

Until she began to read the assigned story.

Scotland Yard opening new investigation into the deaths at Seabridge Manor.

Hungrily scouring the few small paragraphs that followed, red encroached on her vision. An anonymous person had come forward swearing they'd witnessed Reed pouring spirits around the building and then striking a flint.

It wasn't true. Caroline knew it wasn't true because Reed had spent most of that evening in the stable. She herself had delivered the meal Cook had made up.

With the stable-master ill that day, Reed had been walking one of their mares who'd been acting colicky rather than joining their uncle, father, and cousins in the hunting lodge.

Even if the mare hadn't been having difficulty, Caroline doubted Reed would have attended such a gathering. Because they weren't only drinking, but smoking.

It had started when their cousin returned from Calcutta with some special tonics he'd brought for his father. The man had injured his leg jumping horses and was still in a fair amount of pain. A thoughtful gesture, perhaps, but he really should have just stuck with laudanum or something similar.

Even after his leg was healed, her uncle grew more and more dependent. Caroline's mother warned their father not to join in, but the brothers had always been close.

If the fire hadn't killed them, Caroline had no doubt that the opium would have.

"I have to print it." Mr. Black was reading over her shoulder.

"You can't. It's not true." Her lips felt numb.

She felt his breath near her ear. “If you want to discuss this, come to my office.”

And then he disappeared. Was he expecting her to follow?

He couldn't print this. It would only serve to fuel those horrid rumors all over again.

She glanced toward the smaller press and clenched her fists. All her instincts screamed for her to remove the frame and tear out the offending letters. But that wasn't an option. If she did that, Mr. Wallace would merely have the story set again, and she'd get fired.

Ultimately, putting Reed in even more danger.

So... she needed to talk with Mr. Black.

Her legs feeling numb, Caroline placed her pencil on the table and then, very casually, rose, stretched, and forced herself to stroll slowly toward the front of the building. Once she was in the corridor, she lifted her skirts and ran straight to his office.

She didn't knock, but threw the door open and, unfortunately, didn't consider the laws of physics. Thrown by the moment of her entrance, the door bounced off the wall and would have closed again if not for Caroline standing there.

PURPOSE



She was too curious, too argumentative.

Too damned pretty.

Maxwell had called her up to his office to fire her.

Unfortunately, all thoughts of firing her disappeared right after he watched his office door fly open and realized...too late. "Watch out!"

The door bounced into the wall a second time, just in time for Max to watch her crumple onto the floor, causing his heart to skip a beat.

"My lady..." His voice caught. He flew across the room and dropped onto his knees beside her. "Caroline. Sweetheart, are you all right?"

Those lashes twitched, and after a few blinks, she stared back at him with eyes made up of no less than a hundred shades of blue.

How had he missed all those colors before?

"Caroline?" He smoothed a hand over her forehead, around the spot where the door hit her, smoothing silken, chestnut-colored strands away from her face. He couldn't help but notice how perfectly her nose was shaped, but also the fullness of her lips, which were rose pink, soft, inviting.

"That." Slim fingertips touched the corners of her eyes, and she winced. "Wasn't very smart of me."

She tried sitting up, but Maxwell applied the slightest pressure to her shoulder. “No hurry.”

Of course, she ignored him, making another attempt to sit up, and he resorted to glaring at her. “Not so fast. As long as you’re in my office, you’ll do as I say.” He did his best to sound threatening.

She’d taken quite a blow. Why did this woman have to be so ridiculously stubborn?

“I’m fine.” But she squeezed her eyes closed before opening them again. “Can we forget this happened?” Her voice came out small—her expression forlorn.

The picture of her standing alone at that damn ball flashed in his mind.

This girl. This woman.

She was pretty, but also sweet and surprisingly charming, and yet she’d been shunned by the *ton* for something utterly beyond her control. And still, she attended all the usual festivities, smiling at the cold stares and showing kindness to those in her midst.

“Just don’t do it again,” Maxwell said. “Are you still seeing stars?”

She flicked him a rueful smile, and this time he helped her sit up.

“These aren’t the kind of stars I had in mind.”

In Lady Darlington’s garden, she’d complained that there were no stars in the city.

Maxwell dropped his arm around her back, startled at how much he enjoyed touching her. “Don’t make a habit of doing that.” Truth be told, if any of the men who worked for him had done the same, they’d be out the door already.

No one barges into the publisher's office like that—no one.

Except, apparently, Lady Caroline Rutherford.

Keeping his arm in place to support her, Maxwell lowered himself so he was sitting and waited for her to find her bearings.

He *should* sack her—not for barging into his office, but because she wasn't a suitable hire. She didn't fit in—with her sweet-smelling perfume and pretty smiles—never would. But he had an even better reason.

Reed Rutherford's troubles weren't going away. She'd tensed up the moment she saw the article about him. And then she'd challenged him in front of his employees.

Exposing her actual reason for seeking employment at the Gazette. She thought she was going to prevent Maxwell from printing stories about her brother.

She thought wrong.

Maxwell sighed. Her familial loyalty was commendable, really. Perhaps that was part of her appeal. If not for Rutherford's troubles, she'd make for a loyal reporter.

But Rutherford's troubles might as well be hers.

"We need to talk," Maxwell began, fully prepared to explain that this wasn't going to work. But rather than moving away from him, she rested her head on his shoulder with a sigh.

"I don't know why I did that. My mother always says I'm in too much of a hurry. It's why I fell down the stairs at my come-out. I didn't like everyone looking at me. Did you know that the debutante is supposed to pause at the top of the stairs for all the guests to inspect her? Well, I didn't. So, of course,

I kept right on walking but Reed... didn't."

"He let you fall." If Maxwell had been the one to escort her, she never would have fallen.

He wouldn't have allowed her to.

Caroline shrugged beside him. "It wasn't his fault. I was just... nervous. He cannot have realized I was going to throw myself down the steps like that." She groaned a little. "Although it didn't surprise anyone."

Max very nearly kissed the top of her head.

Good Lord. He couldn't fire her now.

She made a little sniffing sound. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I keep doing this..."

Maxwell cleared his throat.

"Give it a few weeks. After Lady Mann's daughters' recital, I'd wager your less-than-perfect come-out is already old news."

"Ha!" But she was smiling now.

Maxwell stretched his legs out in front of him and then sighed. "I'm not all that keen on large gatherings myself." He chuckled. "I'd avoid the *ton* completely if not for my mother."

"The things we do for family." She turned her head to meet his eyes and Maxwell expected her to bring up the Scotland Yard article again.

But in turning her head, she brought her mouth inches from his. Her eyes darkened, the black of her pupils edging out the blues. If her lashes weren't so very thick, he could almost have counted them.

Maxwell cleared his throat.

"Is there anything you wouldn't do for your family?" Maxwell hadn't

thought the question through before uttering it but was genuinely curious to hear her answer. Aside from an elderly cousin on his mother's side, Maxwell's mother was his only living relative.

What would it be like to have sisters and brothers?

"I'd do almost anything for them." Her voice came out low and determined, and her stare never wavered. "If you love someone, you put their needs before your own."

He understood that. He had a mother, after all.

"What about your needs?" Another question he'd not thought through.

Her throat moved as she contemplated her answer and then winced. "I don't think about those," she said. "Ever since... the fire, all that really matters is protecting what's left of my family. Reed, and now Goldie, my mother, and Melanie and Josephine are my world."

Maxwell had known, intellectually, that the fire had brought great tragedy, but he had been mostly concerned with the political and financial fall-out. For those reasons, he'd made sure the Gazette covered every new piece of evidence that emerged. Maxwell tore his stare away from hers.

Was he really so ruthless that he'd not imagined the pain involved for the old earl's family?

He clenched his jaw. He had the newspaper to worry about. The resulting aftermath of stories printed in the Gazette weren't his problem.

"But they aren't your responsibility. It's your brother's duty to protect them," Maxwell said.

"In theory," she agreed. "But Reed didn't grow up expecting to inherit. He wasn't prepared for any of this."

Maxwell grunted.

“Do you have any siblings?” She carried on before he could answer. “According to my sister-in-law, I ought to have memorized the family trees of every titled gentleman listed in Debrett’s. Such information might come in handy occasionally, but to me, it seems contrived. If people want you to know about them, they will share that with you. Wouldn’t you agree?” She touched her head. “Now I’m rambling. That blow must have been harder than I realized.”

He needed to get back to the pressroom but was oddly reluctant. Maxwell turned to her again and studied the angry red mark on her forehead. “I’m afraid it’s going to bruise. How do you feel now?”

“Foolish.”

“No. How does your head feel?”

“Fine.”

He lifted his brows.

“It only hurts a little.” She held his gaze, her teeth worrying her bottom lip. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have barged in like that.”

He wouldn’t chastise her now. It seemed she’d chastise herself enough for the both of them.

“You’re forgiven.” He gave her a little smile, trying to ease her embarrassment. “Maybe try knocking next time?”

Sometime while they’d been sitting together, the office seemed to have gotten smaller—intimate.

Although the voices of his workers and the distinctive sounds of his printing press floated around the main floor, Maxwell had the oddest

sensation that only the two of them existed. He shook it off.

“I’ll escort you home.” Maxwell was going to have to trust Wallace to put the paper to bed tonight.

This time, when he took her hand, she allowed him to pull her to her feet. Once vertical, she swayed a little.

“But I was going to help—”

“You can try again tomorrow.” Apparently he wasn’t going to fire her after all. Not tonight, anyhow.

She may have kept her brother from knowing about her employment this long, but Standish would find out. And he wouldn’t be pleased.

Hell and damnation, by morning, she’d be sporting a noticeable bruise. Maxwell reached for his coat.

“You mustn’t—”

“But I must.” He fastened the top button of his jacket. At least partially decent, he then glanced around for his hat and gloves. Before she could argue any more, they were interrupted when Wallace appeared at the door. In his hands, he held a copy of one of the galleys.

“These are final. Did you want to take a look before I give Fergus the go-ahead?”

Maxwell accepted the oversized sheet of paper and skimmed the copy. “You’ve read through this?”

“At least four times.”

Not catching anything glaring, Maxwell nodded. “Good enough.” How many times had he made just such a declaration only to be bit in the ass the following morning?

Wallace glanced over at Caroline, and then frowned.

“I’m going to escort Miss Smith home.” Maxwell pinned his stare on his newest employee, who looked prepared to flee on her own. “Collect your reticule and I’ll meet you out front,” he ordered.

She shot him a wary glance but then dashed off.

“I’ll send word to Black Hall if you’re needed,” Wallace said, studying Maxwell curiously.

Maxwell didn’t appreciate the look in Wallace’s eyes. “What?”

“You’re sweet on her.” Wallace and Maxwell rarely discussed anything personal. Strike that, in the last year since Maxwell had purchased the Gazette, never once had they discussed anything personal.

“Not at all. Miss Smith, as you’re well aware, is not a miss at all, but a lady. I’d be asking for trouble to send her off by herself—in the dark, no less.” The last thing Maxwell needed to deal with was a brother wanting satisfaction. Not that Maxwell shied away from that sort of thing, but he wasn’t so foolish as to invite it.

Or perhaps he was.

“If you say so,” Wallace mumbled before looking up. “For what it’s worth, her articles for the society section are promising. She writes with more flair than those idiots downstairs.”

“I noticed.” Maxwell extinguished the gas lantern he’d lit earlier and locked the door behind him. Enough moonlight shone through the windows to illuminate the way to the steps.

“She did a good job proofing, too,” Wallace added.

“Let's hope it helps.” Maxwell gave a half-hearted wave. “I’ll see you in

the morning.” Which could, honestly, mean any time between now and the crack of dawn. How many times had Maxwell risen from his warm bed at Black House so he could be at the offices first thing in the morning? And he came because he wanted to.

Because he *belonged*.

Wallace lumbered toward the back and Maxwell made his way to the front entrance, where Caroline stood wearing her coat and clutching a small reticule, waiting for him.

“That was fast,” he said as he held the door, a cool breeze finding its way inside.

“I didn’t bring much with me.” She touched her forehead and grimaced.

“I’m afraid I don’t have my coach here,” Maxwell apologized, glancing up and down the street, hoping to catch a hackney driving by. But none appeared. It was too late, or too early, depending on the hours one kept. “My horse is stabled in back.”

“I can walk. My mother’s home isn’t far.”

“Standish Place is in Mayfair.” Too far to walk, to be sure.

But she was shaking her head. “My mother and sisters and I don’t live at Rutherford Place with my brother. When he married Goldie, we decided my father’s townhouse was more than adequate for the rest of us. No new bride should have to share her home with a house full of in-laws. Our townhouse isn’t far from Mayfair. Up Wellington, near Covent Gardens.”

When no familiar black vehicles appeared, Maxwell glanced at his fob and winced. “You don’t mind walking?”

“Of course not. And really, if you—”

“You aren’t walking alone.” He cut her off. “We’ll take a hackney if one comes along. For now...” He offered her his arm.

She hesitantly took it.

“Your townhouse is in Mayfair?” she asked as they left the Gazette offices behind, their footsteps unusually loud in the quiet of night.

Maxwell dipped his chin. “I’ve made Black Hall my permanent residence.”

“It’s true, then, that you never spend time at your country estate?”

Maxwell pictured the sprawling mansion where he’d spent a good deal of his childhood—the seat of his disillusionment. “I only go to Hell House when it’s absolutely necessary.”

He felt her swing a startled gaze around to him. “Hell House?”

“Helton House.” Maxwell should have realized she wouldn’t let that go. “God-awful place.”

“But why?”

“It’s complicated. Suffice it to say, I don’t belong there.” The rest was better left unsaid, as far as he was concerned.

“Of course you do,” she argued. “You’re Helton.”

And that was the crux of it.

Ever since the day he’d learned of his father’s betrayal, he’d wanted to be anywhere but home. As the country seat of all the earls who’d come before, he felt mocked there—taunted. He’d spent as much time at school as he could get away with.

And when he finally reached his majority, Maxwell had planned on entering the military. It was to have been his escape. But his father died two

weeks before Maxwell's birthday, leaving his mother inconsolable.

Maxwell couldn't leave her. And with each passing year, he wondered less and less how his life would have played out otherwise.

Before Maxwell said something else he oughtn't, she squeezed his arm.

"I feel that way every time I step into a ballroom—not to mention the elaborate garden parties. I felt most at home at that recital. I'm not sure why, though." She tilted her head and it bumped Maxwell's shoulder.

If someone told him a week ago that he'd be walking down Fleet Street in the middle of the night with this woman, alone, he would have said they were dicked in the nob. So why did it feel so...

Natural?

But it wasn't. It shouldn't be.

Maxwell stiffened. "It's not the same. You belong as much as any of those other debutantes. If not for..."

"Oh, I know," she said, her confidence surprising him. "But do I want to belong?"

Maxwell kept silent. She seemed to be working this out for herself and he didn't want to prevent that. God knew, he'd never succeeded at reconciling his own issues.

"Why don't you feel you belong at... Hell House?" she asked.

The moment he'd learned the truth about his father—his father's true identity—Maxwell had felt a peculiar fear enter him. That fear never left.

He never discussed this—not with his mother or anyone else. It was too big of a secret.

"I just..." Maxwell exhaled. "No man requires such abundance. Living at

Hell House, doing nothing but consulting with my estate manager in between weeks of leisure... doesn't feel... right. The paper keeps me busy. It gives me purpose."

Allowing himself to revisit certain memories made his gut clench. He swallowed hard. Would he feel the same if he'd never learned of his father's deception?

"I think I understand. Back home, in the village near Breaker's Cottage, everyone knew me. I had friends. People depended on me. Ever since Reed inherited and brought all of us to London, I've struggled to replace them. In between worrying and so much unnecessary shopping, I've not been myself."

"You don't like shopping?" Maxwell feigned shock. As for her worrying... best to leave that alone for now.

"Apparently, you don't know me at all." But she smiled. They both chuckled and then fell silent as they moved along the shadowed pavement.

"Here?" They'd arrived at Wellington Street.

She nodded, and they turned north.

Her admission explained quite a lot, actually. Why she had spent so much time documenting the Gazette's errors—why she went to such lengths to protect her brother.

And he understood it—that need for purpose.

He'd come to London hoping to forget the past—hoping to forget the truth. Unfortunately, no amount of liquor had been enough.

After a few years of carousing, the Duke of Malum had thrown him a lifeline, asking him to join a small team he'd gathered as vigilantes of a sort. Working to put an end to the trading of opium and tea, a tangible and

worthwhile goal, had been precisely what Maxwell needed.

Purchasing the paper, well, that had served multiple purposes. It provided the group with a powerful tool in their endeavors, kept Maxwell's coffers filled, and allowed him to exercise his need to uncover secrets.

"This is me." They'd arrived at the center of a long row of townhouses—not too run-down, but not nearly as exclusive as the ones a few blocks farther west.

She dropped his arm, but when she went to step away, Maxwell halted her. And yet he was at a loss for words.

"Thank you." She had to tilt her head back to look up at him. Dim candlelight glowed in various windows, and he could just make out her expression, a small knot forming between her eyes.

"I'm sorry about the door." Maxwell raised his hands and grazed his fingertips just around the bruise. He didn't stop to think before touching her. She was right here, in front of him, looking prettier than his society writer had a right to.

"It was my fault." Her voice came out little more than a whisper, drawing his gaze to her mouth. "I'll be more careful in the future." A few inches and he could taste her.

Pink. Plump. She wasn't flirting with him. In fact, unlike other debutantes, she'd not once flirted with him.

He wouldn't count the afternoon he'd met her in the park—because neither had known the other's identity. It had been meaningless. Friendly.

But now...

It would not be meaningless. She was his employee, but she was also

Standish's sister. Spending time alone with this woman was dangerous.

Maxwell dropped his hand and took a very deliberate step back.

She shuffled her feet. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Not if Standish sees that bruise. The thought didn't bring the relief he'd expect.

Watching until she'd entered safely, Maxwell stretched his shoulders forward, conflicted by his own feelings.

He shouldn't keep her on his staff, and yet, he already looked forward to seeing her the next morning, going over the paper with her, reading the articles she would write for the next edition.

He'd give her one more week before letting her go.

Perhaps two.

Maybe longer.

HOME LATE



Caroline closed the door, locked it, and then pressed her back against the cool wood.

He'd almost kissed her. Hadn't he? But then he'd changed his mind.

Or, even more likely, she was wrong. He'd been concerned about the bruise on her head. That was all.

Still, she shivered.

"My apologies for not meeting you. I didn't hear a carriage." Stepping into the foyer, Mr. Long greeted her in a near-whisper, accepting her hat and gloves even as he sent her an accusing look. The ageless gentleman who had performed butler duties for Caroline's family wasn't dressed in his usual attire, but wore a cap and long dressing gown as he slid the lock into place on the door behind her. "Your mother retired hours ago."

"Were you asleep? You needn't wait up for me. I'm more than capable of locking up."

"It's my duty, my lady."

Before Caroline could argue, movement on the staircase caught her attention.

"Mother thinks you were visiting Reed and Goldie." Melanie, who was

nine and ten, looked even younger in her white mob cap and a pale pink dressing gown. “You were at the Gazette, weren’t you?”

Caroline glanced at Mr. Long and then back up the stairs.

“Why would you think that?” she asked in a hushed voice. But it was no use. Mr. Long had heard and if Mr. Long knew, so did her mother.

He dipped his chin. “If that’s all, I’ll return to my chamber.”

“Of course. And thank you, Mr. Long. Good night.” Caroline smiled awkwardly, feeling her sister’s curious and disapproving stare.

Caroline didn’t begin climbing the steps until they were alone. “Who told you?” she asked. Before Melanie could answer, Caroline exhaled. “Goldie?”

“Mother insisted I join them at the theater this evening. I assumed you were going as well, and when you didn’t show up, I asked where you were. Goldie had no choice but to tell me everything.”

“Does Reed know?” At the landing, Caroline turned to go to her chamber and her younger sister followed.

“No. And she explained why... But, Carrie. Don’t you think it could be dangerous? If the *ton* discovers you’re working for Mr. Black at the Gazette, won’t we all be ruined?”

“I’m doing it to protect Reed.” And then she remembered—the Scotland Yard article. She’d forgotten to convince Mr. Black to pull it! How had she forgotten so easily?

That door.

It must have knocked it clean out of her head. “Oh no!”

“What?”

But they’d arrived at the door to Caroline’s chamber. She opened it and

gestured for Melanie to follow her inside.

Eloisa, who sat in a chair by the window, sprang up. “I was so worried, my lady.” The lady’s maid still wore her uniform, and Caroline immediately felt wretched for keeping her up. Would she ever grow accustomed to their change in status?

“Melanie can help me change,” Caroline said. “You needn’t wait so late for me, really.”

Half expecting an argument, she was pleasantly relieved when Eloisa nodded and disappeared into the adjacent dressing room.

“What’s wrong?” Her sister stood unsmiling, hugging her arms in front of her and looking even smaller than usual. Caroline didn’t consider herself a tall person, she wasn’t really, but Melanie’s petite stature made Caroline feel like a giant in comparison. Her younger sister definitely brought out Caroline’s protective instincts.

Melanie hadn’t always been so serious. In fact, before the fire, she’d been the most outgoing, the most light-hearted and boisterous of all of them.

She was the complete opposite of that now. Quiet. Fearful. Anxious.

And unfortunately, her question reminded Caroline that she’d failed to accomplish her mission tonight.

“Scotland Yard is opening an investigation into Reed,” Caroline said. “There’s an article about it in tomorrow’s paper.”

If anything, her sister looked more disturbed than Caroline felt. “What kind of investigation?”

“About the fire.” Caroline closed her eyes for a moment. “About Reed’s part in it.”

Melanie knew the truth, of course—that Reed was completely innocent. Sometimes Caroline suspected her sister knew more than any of them.

“I thought you were going to keep that kind of news out of the paper,” Melanie said.

“I meant to. I am. I will.” Caroline touched her fingertips to her forehead and then, chagrined, told her sister about the door.

“I don’t understand.” Her sister paced across the room while Caroline dropped into the chair vacated by her lady’s maid.

“He was just... so nice about it,” Caroline admitted. Something in her voice caused her sister to halt her pacing.

“Who?”

“Mr. Black. Lord Helton.” Caroline sighed. “Did you know they were one and the same?”

“Of course. It’s not a secret.” But her sister was watching her closely. “But he’s been running articles about Reed all this time. He is the enemy, Caroline!”

Caroline felt terribly guilty. “I know. I know that.” But he *had* been so very kind. “He kept asking if I was all right. And then he walked me home. I think he almost kissed me.”

“You wouldn’t have allowed it, would you?”

“I might have.” She couldn’t tell her sister she’d been disappointed when he’d taken that step away from her.

“But... But...” Melanie sputtered, if possible, looking more disturbed by Caroline’s admission than she had about the article. “You would have allowed *Maxwell Black*? To kiss you? Of all the men in London, really?”

Slapping one hand against her forehead, she appeared more animated than Caroline had seen her look in months.

“Almost. I said he almost kissed me.” Caroline pointed out the significant distinction. “And it’s possible I’m mistaken. But he isn’t really an enemy, Mellie. He’s a good man.”

“He may be, but this is the man who insists on publishing gossip that could get Reed killed—or worse—put him in prison for the rest of his life.”

“I think being killed would be the worse of those two scenarios.”

“Not for Reed,” Melanie said. And she was right, of course. Before inheriting, Reed had been raised to manage their father’s estate. He’d spent most of his life outdoors, overseeing the fields, working with animals, and visiting tenants. “Goldie would be devastated.”

“That’s why neither of those scenarios can ever happen.” But an itch of unease rolled through Caroline. Goldie would see the article about Reed. But also the article about her mother.

She wished she could talk to Goldie before morning—prepare her—console her. Apologize.

She may have put together a considerably improved society section for the paper, but Caroline had failed her brother at the first opportunity.

Melanie shrugged. “I’ll help you out of your gown.”

Caroline turned her back to her sister, who unlaced her day dress with efficient fingers. Once Caroline was in her night-rail, she sat at the vanity, where Melanie took the pins out of Caroline’s hair and, using the brush, untangled the long strands so she could braid them.

“You know, it might not be a bad thing—Maxwell Black courting you.”

Caroline spun around. “He isn’t courting me!”

“He danced with you at the Darlings’ ball.”

“Yes. But only because he felt sorry for me.”

“Goldie says you were the only lady he spoke to at Lady Mann’s daughters’ recital. He must have developed an attachment. Why else would he subject himself to such a painful evening?”

“How do you know it was painful?”

“Unlike you, I listen to the conversations going on around me...”

“I listen.” Caroline glared at her sister. “As for why Mr. Black was there, it was to ensure I did my job right.”

Melanie raised her brows and Caroline sent her sister a warning look in the mirror. “Just don’t tell anyone I’m working for him. I’ve enough difficulties as it is learning the latest gossip. Furthermore, he is not attached to me. At. All.”

“Lady Westcott thought he was. So did the Duchess of Crossings.”

“When did you hear this?”

“Mother dragged me to Bond Street this afternoon. When we met up with the duchess, they talked for hours.”

Caroline winced but a rare smile flitted across Melanie’s mouth. “If you can’t dig up any good gossip to write about, you could always make something up about yourself.”

“Ha!”

The comment was a joke, but Caroline filed it away regardless. It reminded her that Reed had married Goldie to deflect the negative attention he’d received right after the fire. With this new investigation, it wasn’t

unthinkable that she might have to resort to such drastic measures.

Melanie tied off the end of the braid and took a step back. This time when she met Caroline's gaze in the mirror, the younger woman's eyes were filled with concern. "Be careful, Carrie. Promise?"

"Reed's innocent. That's all that matters."

"Just promise me that *you'll* be careful. It's good of you to try to protect Reed, but don't do anything to stir things up too much, all right?" Melanie pressed. Caroline experienced another pang of guilt—because her sister had already been through too much. They all had.

"I promise."

But long after her sister returned to her own chamber, Caroline lie awake—her mind leaping from one problem to another—ultimately returning to any one of the occasions she'd spent in the company of Maxwell Black.

And she realized she noticed things about him that she wouldn't normally notice about a person. Such as the smattering of dark hairs on his arms, just enough on the backs of his hands to make her wonder...

She wasn't as naïve as most girls, she had brothers, after all—or she'd *had* brothers. Now she only had one. But growing up, they'd spent many a summer afternoon swimming in the creek that ran across her father's estate. And although Caroline, Melanie, and Josephine never swam in anything less than their shifts, the boys weren't as proper. And one summer just a few years back, Caroline had stumbled on Reed, Randolph, and their cousin Rupert, as well as a few of the neighborhood boys. All of their clothing had been left on the shore.

Rather than be scandalized, Caroline and Melanie had hidden behind some bushes and... watched. They ignored their family members, of course,

in favor of the other boys. It had been an excellent opportunity to learn something about the opposite sex, and such an opportunity might never have presented itself again! They'd had one favorite in particular: Trent Smithy, the blacksmith's oldest son. With golden blond hair, wide shoulders, legs as thick as trees, and the ability to charm people without saying a word, he'd managed to secure the affections of every young lady from miles around.

His hair had glistened in the sun, on his chest, his legs, and... in far more interesting places.

Caroline allowed herself just a few seconds to imagine Mr. Black's much darker hair before bringing herself up short.

But, oh dear, she'd been disappointed when he hadn't kissed her. Even if it was for the best.

And yet she allowed her hand to drift downward, between her legs, touching herself in a manner that ought to leave her feeling ashamed. Imagining... the texture of his skin, the way his hair sprang out in all directions when he ran his hand through it, and his scent, which reminded her of leather and soap, in the best of ways.

She even liked his spectacles.

Caroline flipped over. She absolutely could not think of him like this! She'd only been legitimately employed for one day. If she wanted to keep her job, she was going to need to come up with new stories for the next edition. Which meant she was going to need to speak to Goldie first thing in the morning.

And as it turned out, that was the one thing she needn't have worried about.

Because before she'd even woken up, her sister-in-law had entered her

chamber. Opening her eyes, Caroline expected to see Eloisa with chocolate and biscuits—a luxury she didn't mind.

But there was no chocolate. No smiling maid.

Goldie drew the drapes open, allowing the early morning sun to streak across the room, and stared at her with accusing and red eyes, as though she'd been crying.

“What happened?” Caroline pushed herself up immediately. “What's wrong?”

“How could you? How could you?” Goldie held something in her hand. Today's paper?

“I tried...” Caroline could explain the door incident, but really, it was a rather weak excuse. “I'll do better in the future. I'm so sorry. Have they come to Reed for questioning yet?”

Goldie's brows furrowed. “What are you talking about?” The paper was folded over and open to the society section. “Why would you write that about my mother? You know how difficult things are with my father right now. How could you?”

A sick feeling slammed into Caroline. It was guilt.

She'd had reservations about the article, but she'd rationalized them away. But staring into Goldie's red and swollen eyes, Caroline couldn't remember why. She'd known the article could cause trouble. Had she soothed her conscience with nothing more than wishful thinking?

“Nia and I had plans to meet Mother at Gunter's today, but there's no way Father will allow her to come after he reads this.”

Caroline closed her eyes. She had done this.

“I didn’t... I hoped... Oh, Goldie. I’m so sorry.” She’d gotten carried away with her desire to impress Mr. Wallace—and Mr. Black, no doubt. “Maxwell suggested the idea, and I guess I wasn’t thinking straight. I’m so sorry. I think I just... hoped...”

Goldie sniffed and dashed away a tear. But then she narrowed her eyes and pinned her stare on Caroline. “*Maxwell*? You call him by his *first name*?”

“I didn’t. He’s my employer. He’s Mr. Black.”

“You did. You said ‘*Maxwell* suggested the idea’.” Goldie put her hands on her hips, but she was even shorter than Melanie and, even angry, lacked the ability to look threatening.

“It doesn’t matter. What does matter is trying to fix the mistake I made by writing that article.” Caroline stared at the offending paper, wishing in the moment that she’d never had anything to do with the London Gazette.

She’d hurt Goldie and her sister! She’d suspected the article could cause trouble and she’d written it anyway. “I’m so sorry,” she said again, even knowing an apology wouldn’t fix anything.

“Words...” Goldie’s umbrage seemed to seep out of her. “Sometimes I think they’re more dangerous than a pistol.”

“Even more so when printed,” Caroline agreed. This wasn’t the first time her enthusiasm had gotten her into trouble, and as much as she hoped it would be the last, she wasn’t naïve enough to believe that. “I really am sorry.”

“I know. I just wish...” Goldie frowned. “Wait, though. You said something about Reed. What were you talking about? Who is coming to question Reed?”

This was getting worse by the minute. Caroline opened the folded paper and pointed to the Scotland Yard section.

Even in the yellow sunlight, Goldie paled as she read it. And then she pinched the bridge of her nose, right between her eyes. “You said you tried to stop it?”

“It was my first day. I’m a nobody right now. But I’ll change that. I promise.” Caroline had not, in fact, made a good faith effort, and she hated making excuses for herself. “This is only one article. I’ll do better next time.” She clamped her mouth closed.

She really didn’t want to explain what had happened with the door and she certainly couldn’t tell Goldie that she had feelings for a man who’d once been willing to see Reed charged with murder.

“What happened to your head?” Goldie leaned forward and touched a fingertip to Caroline’s forehead. “Is that a bruise?”

“It’s nothing.”

“You have purple around your eyes.”

Goldie was not going to let this go.

“I, er, ran into a door.” Or the door ran into her, rather. But the sun was bright and Caroline didn’t have time to dwell on yesterday’s mistakes. “What time is it?”

“It’s early.” Goldie sighed as she stared at the offending newspaper. “Oh, Caroline.”

Caroline would find some way to fix the problem she’d made for the Duchess of Crossings. Furthermore, she’d give Maxwell Black a piece of her mind for printing the lie about her brother.

But first... “I need stories for the society page.”

For half a second, Caroline wondered if her sister-in-law was going to leave without helping her. But then Goldie sighed.

“Nia’s expecting.”

“Expecting what?” Caroline asked.

“No, she’s not—She’s *expecting* expecting.”

Caroline’s mouth dropped open. “A baby?” And then she realized what Goldie was saying. “You want me to put that in the Society section tonight?”

“It’ll come out eventually. There’s no reason to hide it. And really, people knowing won’t hurt anything.”

“I don’t think—”

“I know, I know,” Goldie winced. “But news that the man formerly known as the Piccadilly Player might beget an heir could draw attention away from the investigation... and Reed,” Goldie finished sheepishly.

But... “What about your parents?” She’d been careless already.

“It might help with that as well. He’ll be their grandchild, after all.”

“Or she.”

Goldie smiled weakly. “Or she.”

But Caroline had already made trouble for the two sisters. She needed to proceed with caution. “Tell her the situation and ask her permission. If your sister wants her news kept private, I’ll leave it be.” And then she clutched her hands to her chest. “But that’s so exciting! And terrifying! I didn’t notice anything different about her last night. When...? How long until you become an aunt?”



FOLLOWING Goldie and Reed's early morning visit, Caroline dressed and, rather than taking her usual tea in her private chamber, brought her pencil and paper downstairs so she could jot down story ideas while breaking her fast in the morning room.

But just as she opened the paper for a thorough readthrough, her mother joined her.

"Where were you last night?" Her mother skipped the usual morning felicitations, making Caroline wish she'd stayed in her chamber after all. She had forgotten that her mother knew she'd not been with Reed and Goldie the night before. "And what's happened to your face?"

"I ran into a door." It was the truth. In a way...

"Oh really?"

"Really. It's nothing."

"Did you run into this door at the Gazette's office last night?"

Caroline took a breath to answer, to confess at least part of her and Goldie's plan, but before the words came out, Mr. Long interrupted. "My apologies, Mrs. Rutherford, my lady. Mr. Black is here to see you. Shall I tell him you are indisposed?"

Mr. Black? Was *here*? Caroline shot out of her chair. "No. No. I'll meet with him in the drawing room." On the one hand, she was grateful for the interruption. But on the other hand, *what on earth was he doing here*? "Erm, excuse me, Mother."

But her mother was rising as well. "You can't meet with the earl without a chaperone, darling." Mrs. Rutherford slid Caroline a meaningful look—a look that broached no argument.

“He isn’t courting me,” Caroline said.

“Why else would a gentleman come calling for you?”

“For a thousand different reasons. Perhaps he wants to be friends. Or perhaps he requires my help.”

“With his newspaper?” Her mother cocked a brow and Caroline winced.

“Perhaps,” she answered. “I’m helping Reed.”

“Reed knows about this?”

Caroline hesitated. “Not exactly...Please, Mother. Let me speak with him alone.”

“You are sadly mistaken if you think that’s a possibility. Come on, then. Let’s go speak with this earl. If we can help Reed, all of us must step up.”

MEETING HER MOTHER



Feminine voices—at least two of them—had Maxwell rising from the settee, his eyes searching for an escape. What had he been thinking? She'd only made her come-out this year. Of course her mother wouldn't allow him to meet with her alone.

Realizing he was, indeed, trapped, he quickly twisted his mouth into what he hoped resembled an agreeable expression. The door opened, and his heart tripped a little at the sight of Caroline, who looked tired but pretty in a bright blue gown as she sent him an apologetic grimace.

The apologetic look, he presumed, was for her mother's presence.

"My lady." He bowed to the older woman.

"Not a lady, my lord. If my husband was ever a lord, it was only for a few seconds. I choose to remain Mrs. Rutherford."

Maxwell swallowed hard. If Mr. Rutherford had been an earl for a few seconds, in those moments, he would have realized his fate.

"Mrs. Rutherford," Maxwell said, dipping his chin and wishing he'd waited for his newest reporter to appear at the Gazette rather than showing up at her home uninvited.

If he'd wanted privacy, he could just as easily have asked her to come to

his office.

His office, where he no longer knew who he could trust.

“My apologies for intruding so early on your day,” he added.

“I’m actually pleased. Especially after escorting my daughter home so late last night—*very* late and without a chaperone.” The woman lifted one brow, the force of her assumption landing with pinpoint accuracy.

The assumption being that Maxwell was courting her eldest daughter—because he had, in fact, walked Lady Caroline home far later than was appropriate. As for a chaperone...

“I—” He cleared his throat. “It was not my intention—” He coughed in an attempt to clear out the choking sensation.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to work out the contracts with my son. Although, you have my approval. There is plenty of time to plan the wedding to take place at the end of the season.”

“Pardon?”

“*Mothhherrrr.*” Caroline sent Mrs. Rutherford an admonishing look. “I told you already that Mr. Black is *not* courting me.”

“I wouldn’t know. He certainly acts as though he is courting you.” And then the older woman moved her hands from behind her back, where she had been holding a copy of today’s paper. This woman’s eyes were alert—and cunning—not unlike her daughter’s. “The most determined bachelors have been forced to marry for far less, mind you. But I’ll leave that conversation for his lordship and Reed to have later. What I want to know, my lord, is, what are we going to do about this?”

She pointed to his paper. Specifically, the Scotland Yard article. She was

going to rebuke him for reminding the *ton* that murder charges had not yet been cleared where Lord Standish was concerned.

Flicking a glance in Caroline's direction, Maxwell exhaled. No doubt she was also as protective of her son as she was of her daughter.

Possibly more so.

And Maxwell was the person who'd approved that article. He would not apologize for it.

"When Scotland Yard opens an investigation, it's my obligation to publish it." He did not gentle his voice. News was news.

"Seeing as my son was nowhere near the hunting cabin that night, they won't find anything. But no one really cares about the truth, do they? Unfortunately, by simply reading these rumors, people develop opinions. Some will act upon them."

"It isn't all that damning, Mother."

But Mrs. Rutherford wasn't finished.

"Perhaps not this time. But it's getting more and more difficult to know what the truth is. A problem only exacerbated by these ubiquitous mistakes in your paper, in particular. They aren't isolated to the news, they've even found a way into your society section." She cast a disappointed stare in her daughter's direction.

"The society section?" Caroline all but whipped the paper out of her mother's hands, a copy of the same paper Maxwell had folded and stuffed inside his jacket—with similar markings.

As she began reading, twin lines of worry formed in the center of her forehead, her eyes darkened with concern... "These weren't here last night."

She was shaking her head. “I read through these five times. I would never...!”

“I know.” Maxwell scrubbed a hand down his face. “I’m not blaming you. If it was a matter of a few clerical errors, we would have resolved them by now. This,” he shook his head, “Seems intentional.”

“It is intentional. At first I thought it was carelessness, but a person would have to be blind to miss these.” Mrs. Rutherford tapped her chin and then clapped her hands together. “You must compile a list of your enemies.”

“Why would Mr. Black have enemies?” Caroline swung around to admonish the older woman but she just as suddenly turned back to Maxwell, her mouth making an ‘o’, her eyes as bright as blue fire. “Have you? Many enemies, that is?”

“Everyone has enemies, darling. Lord Helton, perhaps, more than most. He is, after all, not only a member of the *ton*, but the publisher of a newspaper.” Mrs. Rutherford located paper and pencil in a drawer and gestured toward the settee. “Enough is enough. Let’s have a seat and see if we can put an end to these pranks.” The pencil hovered over pristine stationery as she lifted her gaze to Maxwell’s. “Who in London most wishes to see you fail?”

“Other than Reed,” Caroline added, watching Maxwell with a curious expression. Was she really so surprised? Honestly, it would be much more difficult *not* to ruffle a few feathers in his line of work..

“Well, of course, that goes without saying. Anyone with half a brain knows Reed wouldn’t hurt a fly.” Mrs. Rutherford straightened her back.

Maxwell *didn’t* know that actually, though it would perhaps be unwise of him to mention as much in present company. Even so, he had to admit that he

wasn't exactly inclined to suspect his employee's brother anyhow, based on his few interactions with the man, so that was neither here nor there.

"If I were to read through my old issues of the paper, even considering the worst of the scandals, I imagine the possibilities are endless." He'd learned early on that he wasn't publishing a paper to make friends.

"There was the article about that teacher at Miss Primm's girls' school, where the paper misreported Viscount Bloodstone's marriage. But they married anyway. You reported Dewberry's demise before the fact." She tapped her pencil against her chin. "But he did die eventually. I must admit, the Gazette manages to get about half the stories right."

"More than that." Maxwell felt compelled to defend himself. It cut, however, that her assertion wasn't completely inaccurate.

The fact was, he had real enemies. Some in prison, some who'd eluded Malum's efforts. Crossings came to mind, but so far, the duke had been impossible to pin down.

The trouble was, Maxwell couldn't make a connection between their crimes and the sabotage to his paper.

Mrs. Rutherford donned a pair of spectacles and then removed two books from the end table beside her. "My daughter would do well to study these..."

Debrett's and *Burke's Peerage*. Maxwell pinched his mouth closed, exhaling through his nostrils, ignoring the familiar panic. Was Mrs. Rutherford going to look up his ancestors?

"I doubt whoever is out to ruin the Gazette is listed in either of those." He sure as hell didn't want Caroline or her mother studying the Black family line. Or anyone, really.

"My top guess is it's one of the other newspaper publishers. They'd have

the most to gain if the Gazette went under.” Listening to her mother, Caroline’s hands moved nervously in her lap—a habit he’d noticed when she’d joined the staff in the pressroom the night before. “Are you well-acquainted with any of them?”

Maxwell leaned back in his seat, running a hand through his hair. He’d gone along with this conversation to placate Mrs. Rutherford. He hadn’t expected it to net any usable results. “I’ve had my disagreements with some of the other publishers, but nothing that would lead to this level of sabotage,” he admitted. “Unless someone wants to buy the paper cheap.” Which, with the upgrades he’d made to his press, would be a travesty.

Caroline locked gazes with him. “But that wouldn’t be fair. Mr. Wallace says you’ve invested heavily.”

“Who is this Mr. Wallace?” Mrs. Rutherford asked.

“He is Mr. Black’s managing editor.”

“You trust this person?” The older woman’s expression was serious.

“Wallace was a fixture at the Gazette long before I took over.” Maxwell tilted his head and frowned. He’d given all his employees the benefit of the doubt. It seemed that might have been a naïve mistake on his part. “A week ago, my answer would have been an unwavering yes.”

“We mustn’t leave any stone unturned.” Mrs. Rutherford nibbled on her pen. “Start with everyone who has access and then consider the individuals or groups who have shown a vehement opposition to your newspaper’s editorial positions.”

Caroline’s elegant fingers scribbled across the paper as she made notes Maxwell couldn’t quite decipher. “We’ll compile a list of possible adversaries and cross reference them *and their associates* with the Gazette’s employees.”

She then listed the names of the pressmen, the composers, reporters, and even Wallace.

Maxwell couldn't help but be impressed by such a workable strategy. She was proving herself to be an asset beyond her talents as a writer. "Easy enough," he said, his admiration evident in his tone.

Caroline's mother closed her genealogy books and rose. Maxwell remembered his manners just in time to burst off the settee as well.

"With that settled, I'll leave you two to your... research." She gathered the books and hugged them against her chest before making her exit—winking at her daughter, and then closing the door behind her.

Caroline winced. "She's determined to marry me off and I'm afraid that by coming here this morning, you've earned the top spot on her potential husband list. If not for me, then for my younger sister, Melanie."

Maxwell stared at the young woman who had wedged her way into the running of his newspaper, not to mention his thoughts, and came to a surprising conclusion.

The gentlemen of the *ton* were a bunch of dolts. Apparently, they were partial to muddle-headed girls who, although pretty, made breathy little sighs instead of conversation and stared at the world with vapid eyes.

Otherwise, they'd be fighting one another to fill Caroline's dance card.

Caroline, who, although half a foot shorter than Maxwell, stood taller than most Mayfair debutantes. The cut of her dress, made up of baby blue muslin, was cinched tight with a white ribbon that emphasized her trim waist and an occasional flash of enticing ankles.

"If your mother is concerned about your prospects, she has no cause to worry."

“I beg to differ.” Caroline flashed him a smile, her eyes sparkling with intelligence. “Melanie is much prettier. And Josephine, even at the age of six and ten, already outshines the two of us.”

Maxwell allowed his gaze to roam over her perfect figure, wondering how long her hair was, and what those chestnut locks would look like draped down her back. He then found himself studying her full lips, curved up just enough to make him wonder what she was thinking.

“I refuse to believe it,” he said.

Was he flirting? That wasn’t why he’d come, damn his deprived libido. Lapse in judgement, that was all.

But if that was the case, why did he move closer? And why did the subtle fragrance of her scent shoot straight to his groin?

TRUST



*M*r. Black's praise sent heat creeping up Caroline's neck and into her cheeks. She had no misconceptions regarding her appearance, and false compliments made her uncomfortable.

And yet, this man sounded rather genuine, really, and the warmth in his eyes belied his tough exterior.

He was a good man—a kind man.

But he most definitely wasn't courting her. He barely tolerated her.

Caroline rolled her lips together. Why was he here?

The offending issue of today's newspaper caught her eye—riddled with errors. The paragraphs she'd painstakingly written were out of order, missing entire words, and rife with misspellings so flagrant no one could possibly comprehend what she'd meant. The only consolation was the reading public had no way of knowing who'd authored it.

At the same time she dropped back onto the settee, the realization struck her. He'd come to terminate her employment. That would explain the compliments—not to mention his conviction that she could land a husband.

The blood in her veins turned cold and beads of sweat materialized on the back of her neck.

“Please don’t sack me!” She would talk him out of it—bribe him—blackmail him if necessary.

Because she needed... a place to be each morning. She needed to make a difference!

She needed this.

For Reed! Of course.

Mr. Black, who’d claimed the spot beside her, blinked. “Why would I do that?”

“Because... you said...” Caroline gulped. “I’m employed on approval and this...” Her gaze dropped to the jumble of words that were meant to have been a society section and she stopped herself before providing him with half a dozen reasons to let her go.

“But then why have you come?”

His forearms rested on his knees, and he stared down at his hands, which were loosely clasped.

“I’m not sure.”

Staring at his profile, his neck, and the dejected slump of his wide shoulders, a crack splintered the area around her heart. She kept her mouth shut and waited for him to work his reasoning out for himself.

“I woke up this morning, and like almost every morning for the past several months, I found that the product I’d painstakingly put together the night before is actually little better than a pile of excrement.”

“I’m so sorry about my comments in the park.” Not that they were untrue, or meant to be cruel. Furthermore, she’d had no idea at the time that she was criticizing the publisher himself.

But her words had been cruel. “I never would have...”

He waved a hand, dismissing her apology. “You cannot have known. In truth, I think hearing your insults forced me to realize something important. I’ve been too focused on the mechanics of printing of the paper, believing the content would work itself out.”

Caroline barely stopped herself from taking his hand.

“And the content will get worked out—just not on its own.” But he still hadn’t said why he’d come here... to her mother’s house—she glanced at the mantel—before ten o’clock in the morning.

“Maybe this is all a mistake. I don’t belong at the Gazette any more than I do in the House of Lords.”

When her hand reached out to his, she didn’t stop it this time. Why would he not believe he belonged in parliament? He was an earl, for heaven’s sake.

But she paused to consider other comments he’d made—and the fact that he didn’t like being addressed by his title.

“You belong,” she said. In fact, she couldn’t imagine any place he might go where he wouldn’t. And not because of his looks, but because of the energy inherent in his person—authority, charm, and confidence.

“You belong...” she swallowed hard when her voice caught and then added, “Everywhere.”

Mr. Black swiveled his head around and locked his gaze with hers. “You asked me why I came here this morning.”

“Yes.”

“You said you were the only person I can trust.” He sat silently, staring into her eyes. “Turns out, you’re right.”

“You trust me.” Caroline could feel the corners of her mouth twitching up into a pleased grin. Such simple words. But voiced by this man, they felt like the highest of compliments. “What do you need me to do?”

“It’s a rather daunting request. I won’t think less of you for declining.”

Her toe tapped out a beat, her foot bouncing up and down. “Just tell me.”

She would help him, she wanted to help him, but she couldn’t allow that to foil her original mission—to prevent articles about Reed from making their way into the paper and to hopefully squash the rumors.

Put an end to the ridiculous investigation.

“I need more eyes on that final flat—eyes I can trust.”

This was what she’d wanted to do from the beginning. “You want me to stay late and help... keep watch.”

“Not tonight, of course. You have the Chaswick ball to attend.”

“I don’t have to—”

“But you do.”

Attending one of the most pretentious balls of the Season, however, could not be any lower on her list of priorities. It fell somewhere between bathing Pip after he’s played in the mud and emptying chamber pots. Although that wasn’t fair to Pip.

Pip would never give her the cut.

“No doubt, your mother agrees with me,” he added. Which, of course, was true.

“Will you be there?” It wasn’t an unreasonable question.

“I’m not a debutante.”

“You are an unmarried bachelor, though.”

“That doesn’t signify.”

“Won’t Lady Helton expect you to make an appearance? What good is the marriage mart if all the eligible gentlemen make themselves scarce rather than escort a few wallflowers through a set or two?” Not that she agreed with it. But she couldn’t help but argue against the double standard.

“Don’t bring my mother into this.” Mr. Black lifted one brow. “Besides, unmarried and eligible aren’t the same thing.”

“Are you betrothed, then?”

“No.”

“Engaged?”

Again, he would show this resistance to all things concerning Mayfair society. His gaze shifted to somewhere over her shoulder and his jaw clenched.

“Are you... in love?” She nearly whispered. Because he could be in love with someone who was totally inappropriate. That would explain his reluctance.

But she couldn’t welcome the notion. Not after wanting him to kiss her.

Caroline suddenly, inexplicably, resented this faceless woman whom he couldn’t marry.

“I am *not* in love.” He glanced over his shoulder, looking exasperated.

“Oh,” she said. “You are waiting to meet the perfect woman.”

“There is no perfect woman.” He turned around. “I wouldn’t marry her if there was.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know why we’re having this conversation.”

“I want to help you with the Gazette tonight.”

“And do I, but as my society writer, I need to you to cover the Chaswick ball tonight.”

Touché.

“Very well.”

But the prospect of dressing up only to be laughed at and ignored, all while smiling and pretending none of it bothered her, suddenly struck with the force of an anvil.

“I hate it. I hate all of it.” She pinched her mouth together, frustrated to have lost the freedoms she’d been allowed back in Willowbrook Springs. It wasn’t the same for men. They did whatever they wanted while ladies were expected to knit or embroider at home. It was the men who shaped the world around them. Her eye twitched.

“The ridiculous rules, the judgmental stares. I’d be happy to never attend another *ton* event in my life. I want...”

Her chest expanded as she processed this unsettling mixture of exasperation and yearning. She was suddenly tired, so terribly tired of battling against a world that demanded conformity.

“I want to do something meaningful,” she finished.

She felt his hand on her back—circling—warm and comforting and so very unexpected. As were his next words.

“Mayfair can be a stifling, merciless beast, Caroline. But they’ll forget, I promise.”

“What if they don’t? How can I expect people to forget my come-out

when even I can't? What if my mother expects me to return year after year until..." She didn't finish because she couldn't bear the thought of it.

He sat silently for nearly a full minute. "Was it really that bad? You didn't land on the queen, did you? Or knock over a cake?"

"I simply made a cake of myself." Caroline huffed, sending her bangs flying.

The corner of his mouth twitched. "From what my mother says, your stockings protected your modesty—mostly—even if half of London now knows you're partial to lavender." The half-smile grew to a full one. His lips were a dusty pink. They were plump, but not too plump for a man, and aside from a few crooked incisors, his teeth lined up in a near-perfect white row.

She moaned. "They belonged to Melanie. Mine are blue, but I tore one while I was getting dressed." Why on earth was she discussing something so intensely personal with him?

"Ah..." he grinned. "Blue is my favorite color."

A flash of... something... shot through her, and she cautiously met his gaze, which had darkened and seemed to stare into her very soul.

The air in the room turned heavy. And she could hear her own heart beating.

Good lord! She was discussing her undergarments with her employer! She needed to change the subject—*desperately*.

"But, to answer your question, no, I did not land on the queen. If you bothered attending more events yourself, you'd know that the queen wasn't present. Of course. Why would the queen come to my come-out? I mean, I'm barely even a lady and never would have been if not for..." She cut herself off, not wanting to discuss her brother with the man who'd printed a story

that very day that could lead to further trouble for Reed.

Mr. Black shrugged. “But you are a lady now, and it’s important you remember that pertinent piece of information when you enter the Chaswick ballroom tonight. Hold your head high. God knows you’re more intelligent than those empty-headed socialites who’ve given you the cut.”

The cut. A gesture as painful as any physical sort of assault. She smiled weakly at his attempt to be encouraging. She was his society writer, after all.

Caroline cleared her throat. “I’ll be fine.”

Maxwell Black, an esteemed London gentleman, but also the Earl of Helton, couldn’t possibly comprehend what it felt like to be an outcast.

And this evening, while she clumsily skirted the edges of Lady Chaswick’s ballroom, he’d be across town, energized, working in the unpretentious atmosphere of his very own newspaper offices.

While she hid behind a ficus, he’d be overseeing the process of producing something nearly all of England eventually read, proofing galleys, getting ink on his hands, and making editorial decisions.

Doing something *meaningful*.

Furthermore, he’d have the opportunity to act as a detective, possibly identifying which of his employees was betraying him—without her.

But she, too, had a job to do. She’d tune her ears in to the gossip, see which stories she could confirm, and find the best content of any society section in town. Once she had her stories, she’d tell her mother she needed to go home and write.

She could always claim the onset of a megrim.

If she could make an early exit, however, she would ask her mother’s

coachman to deliver her to the Gazette's offices. And Mr. Black would be happy to have her watching over those printing frames—perhaps catch the person changing out type.

“I'll expect you to help tomorrow night.” His voice, deep and soothing, cut through her scheming.

She nodded. She'd go to the ball, wait until the first set was over, and then make her excuses.

“I'll wager your dance card fills before the first waltz.” A frown flashed across his face but disappeared so quickly, it made her wonder if she'd imagined it.

“Don't bet money you aren't prepared to pay,” she said.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed the door through which her mother had exited had not been closed all the way. Her mother would, no doubt, be outside listening. And Caroline understood. Without her father to watch over them, they would have to watch over each other in his stead. Reed, Mother, Caroline, Melanie, and even Josephine—and Goldie now, as well.

Mr. Black's gaze shifted toward the door knowingly, and the two of them simultaneously rose to stand.

“I'll see you out, then.” She spoke formally. She needed to research the stories she and Goldie had decided on, write them up, and then deliver them to Mr. Wallace.

Mr. Black's eyes caught and held hers and then, taking her hand, he bowed. “Good day, my lady.”

A chill ran down her spine and she dipped her chin. “Good day, *my lord.*”

His eyes narrowed. “*Mr. Black. Maxwell*, even, if we’re not at the office.”

Caroline rolled her lips together and nodded. “In that case, good day.”
But she couldn’t help herself and added, “*Max.*”

MAX



“Good day,” she’d said. *“Max.”*

At some point Max had begun thinking of Caroline by her given name. It suited her—cheerful, determined, and lovely.

But even his own mother had never called him just... *“Max.”*

Caroline’s shortening of his name ought to have irritated him.

It didn’t.

He endured his title only because, as long as his mother lived, he couldn’t abdicate. People would want to know why. They’d want to know the truth, and his mother would be devastated. No matter how many times he considered his predicament, he arrived at the same conclusion.

He shook his head. Nothing good could come from wasting his thoughts on something he had no control over.

What he did have control over was his paper—or he ought to, anyway. Which was why he’d made this morning’s visit. And it had been a satisfying visit.

Caroline had agreed to assist him in weeding out the traitor at the newspaper. He hadn’t lied when he’d said he trusted her.

So, why, as he walked away from the modest townhouse where she lived,

didn't he feel relief? Max stretched his shoulders.

An unsettling emotion followed him. And rather than head for his offices, he found himself striding in the direction of his mother's house instead. She always appreciated a visit from her only son, but in addition to that, she might be in need of an escort to the Chaswick mansion for tonight's ball.

"Ho there!"

A familiar voice caught Max from behind. He turned around to see Winterhope, dressed meticulously in a royal blue jacket, navy waistcoat, and perfectly creased trousers, increase his pace, jogging to catch up.

"Missed you on the row this morning," the marquess said.

Normally Max would have met his associates for early morning sprints down Rotten Row, after finishing up with the paper and before going home to catch a few hours of sleep.

Winterhope shook his head, apparently guessing the reason for Max's absence. "The mistakes have got to be deliberate," he said. "The question is why."

"I need to find out *who* first," Max grouched.

But then Winterhope's gaze shifted down the street to the house Max had exited a few moments before. "Early business this side of town?" He cocked a brow.

Max held up a hand before the other man made any erroneous assumptions. "I am not courting her."

"Try telling that to Lady Mann or her dragon of a sister. What were you thinking, singling one woman out at the musicale so soon after dancing with her last week? I know you don't like covering that sort of thing in the

Gazette, but that doesn't mean other papers won't do it."

What had he been thinking? Max had been thinking about his paper, that was what. Although, at some point, more and more, his thoughts of the paper merged with images of Caroline... Which made no sense at all.

But Winterhope had a point. Max was going to have to be more careful where Lady Caroline Rutherford was concerned. "She's an employee. Nothing more, nothing less."

Winterhope's expression remained skeptical.

"Never known you to dance with *Wallace* or send *him* smoldering glances from across the room."

Max scowled at Winterhope, affronted. He absolutely, positively had not been sending Caroline smoldering glances. Such an accusation wasn't even worth acknowledging. As for leading her in a dance...

"That's because I've never employed a society writer before. She's had a rough time of it, and I simply want to ensure that she's comfortable." Which reminded him of the ball that evening, and the reluctance on Caroline's face while discussing her prospects there.

But that wasn't his problem. Nor was her enjoyment.

Her attendance, on the other hand, as his employee, *was* his business. But he would not be dancing with her, nor would he be walking her about the room.

And he sure as hell wouldn't be sending her any smoldering glances.

A SHIFT



As Caroline curtsied for what felt like the hundredth time, she shot a surreptitious glance to her left and then her right.

Something had changed. People not only met her gaze, but they were actually... talking to her!

When she had stepped into the Chaswick ballroom behind Reed and Goldie, her mother at her side, the people who looked her way had not turned away. No, they had held her gaze, almost polite expressions flitting across their faces.

And before she'd located a convenient corner to hide in, Caroline's mother had been stopped by five, yes, *five* gentlemen requesting an introduction to her daughter.

Her *very lovely* daughter.

It was as though the debacle of her come-out had never happened.

Holding a glass of champagne in one hand and her fan in the other, she marveled that, although her dance card wasn't completely filled, several presumably upstanding gentlemen had claimed dances. Even Lord Dankworth, the man she'd overheard refer to her as a "charity dance," had begged an introduction.

Caroline hadn't the heart to refuse him for fear of embarrassing her mother, who was obviously thrilled at Caroline's startling popularity.

Up until that evening, no one had shown any interest in her eldest daughter, and she'd informed Caroline that she wouldn't allow Melanie or Josephine to come out this year unless Caroline was "off the market."

Dreadful words.

"What is happening?" Caroline whispered to Goldie.

Her sister-in-law tapped her fan against her lips thoughtfully as her eyes darted around the room. "It's because Lord Helton singled you out twice now. This is how things work. Having caught the eye of an earl has apparently increased your value."

"I don't want my value increased." She simply wanted to fulfill the promise to her mother—enduring the season and hopefully emerging unattached. And she might not accomplish that if she received an offer for marriage from an upstanding gentleman.

"Of course you do." Goldie winked. "Is Lord Helton romantically inclined toward you? Has he... done anything to indicate—"

"Good lord, no!" Caroline shook her head. "We're conducting business. It's not... it's not *like that*." Even if he did hold her gaze longer than was strictly necessary and had granted her permission to use his given name.

Even though he had walked her home, and then given the impression that he might kiss her.

Because he had not—*kissed* her, that is.

He certainly wasn't *romantically inclined*!

"It's not at all true," Caroline reiterated. "Not at all!"

“I don’t think anyone cares about the truth,” Goldie said. “All that matters amongst the *ton* is that an earl finds you desirable, therefore, you are deserving of their attention.”

But the truth did matter! That was why she’d gone to the newspaper. To somehow set the record straight about her brother. And to... make the paper better.

Confused and a little shaken, Caroline sipped her champagne. As the bubbles danced on her tongue, she pondered the one viscount, two barons, and three untitled but landed gentlemen who’d claimed dances after boasting of their connections. Was it possible that they had only done so because Maxwell singled her out at the musicale?

Were they really that fickle?

Goldie elbowed her, discreetly glancing toward the door. “Speak of the devil...”

Caroline followed her sister-in-law’s stare.

“...And he shall appear...” Caroline completed the quote.

Suddenly the lights were a little brighter, the music more melodic, and the champagne sweeter.

He wasn’t wearing his spectacles, and he squinted slightly. Not so much that anyone would notice, but she did.

He escorted his mother, holding one hand over hers protectively. His dark hair was smoothed away from his face and his jaw had been freshly shaven. Aside from a more formal jacket, however, he wasn’t all that different from the man who’d come to her house early that morning.

She was even willing to bet that when she had the opportunity, she’d find

ink stains on his hands.

But he'd told her he was not coming! Why had he changed his mind? He moved across the floor and stood patiently while his mother greeted three other dowagers.

I'm here. She willed him to look at her. When he didn't, she glanced down at the dance card tied around her wrist: six dances left.

"He's handsome in a roguish sort of way," Goldie's statement had Caroline spinning around in disapproval. "Not nearly as good-looking as Reed, of course."

"Of course," Caroline echoed, before flicking her stare back to where Max had been standing.

Finding him again, she watched as he bowed over one of the elderly lady's hands. And mesmerized by his shiny black hair, sharp jawline, and the confident way he held his shoulders, she silently apologized to her brother.

Because Maxwell Black was, indeed, better looking than Reed. Even without his spectacles.

Had he captured his saboteur? Or was he here for... *her*?

Just then his gaze swept the room, landed on Caroline, seemed to flicker, and then...

Kept right on moving.

Cool embarrassment flushed her veins, but then she shook her head. If he was here about the paper, he wouldn't be obvious about it. Her employment there was meant to be a secret. Of course he wouldn't walk right over.

Or more likely, without his spectacles, he had not recognized her.

He would find her later—when he wasn't the object of so much attention.

She was only a little disappointed when Lord Northwood appeared for the dance he'd reserved. And she wasn't at all disappointed to see Maxwell lead a petite blonde girl onto the floor, one who giggled and blushed at something he whispered near her ear.

"You are positively radiant this evening." The earl spoke loudly from across the space between couples.

So, Caroline sent him an awkward smile and then curtsied as the orchestra began to play. *Forward, back. Take her partner's hand, which was cool and clammy, walk in a circle, step back, and begin again.* The dance wasn't lively, but she had to concentrate, which wasn't easy, as only two spaces existed between her partner and Maxwell.

She would eventually take his hand. Her heart skipped half a beat and butterflies danced in her belly. All this talk about romantic intentions... She forced her thoughts back to the dance.

Forward, back. Take her neighbor's partner's hand, this one damp and hot, walk in a circle, step back, and begin again. One more time.

Forward, back.

Maxwell's hand was warm and dry.

"I thought you weren't coming this evening." She spoke just loudly enough for him to hear as he turned her in a circle. His scent hit her unexpectedly, spicy.

Alluring.

But the man himself didn't even look at her. "My lord?" She frowned, and he still hadn't answered by the time she stepped back and moved on to her next partner.

Was he angry with her? She searched through the details of her day—of the work she'd completed since his morning visit. She'd delivered quality articles to Mr. Wallace that afternoon. One that speculated over a duke's youngest son and his marriage prospects, another about a local marquess who claimed to have discovered a new star. Was he angry about the article she'd written about Reed's charitable donations?

They had all been well-written and relatively verifiable, although not quite the usual stuff one read on other gossip pages. But she'd been hesitant after the harm her story had done to Goldie and Lady Westcliff's mother.

At least two scandals were being bandied about, but unable to confirm the truth in either, Caroline hadn't turned those in.

Because the truth was important, despite what everyone said.

"Psst! Lady Caroline!"

Lost in her thoughts, she'd fallen behind in her steps and had to skip a few times to catch up with Lord Northwood. But when she glanced toward Maxwell, seeking some sort of acknowledgement, again, he seemed to deliberately look in the opposite direction.

By the end of the dance, her mood had changed from confusion to disappointment. She'd thought they were friends. Just that morning, he'd told her he trusted her.

The night wore on, and although her plans to leave early were squashed, she made a very deliberate effort to be charming to the gentlemen who'd claimed dances.

She also did her best to ignore Max's presence, but mostly failed. Because she didn't have to see him to know he was there.

"Your hair's done up differently tonight," Goldie said as she repaired her

coiffure in the ladies' retiring room before the supper dance. "Perhaps he didn't recognize you."

But the comment only made the situation worse. Because she heard pity in her sister-in-law's voice.

"Who are you talking about?" she asked, feigning indifference.

But Goldie wasn't one to let her off the hook so easily. "You know who."

Yes. She did. And it did bother her, but was she really so obvious?

Even worse, it seemed Goldie wasn't the only one who pitied her. Because Goldie's expression was eerily similar to that of a few other ladies who must have noticed as well.

Gah! First, his attentions caused other gentlemen to notice her, ruining her plans of an early exit, and now his actions were making her seem pitiful.

It was not only rude but mean spirited.

She forced the corners of her mouth to turn up. "Lord Dankworth is rather good-looking, don't you think?"

Goldie scrunched up her face. "His collar is too high, and he wears padding in his shoulders. Other than that, I suppose he's tolerable..." Goldie could not appear any more dubious as her stare met Caroline's in the mirror.

"Are you finished?" Caroline fussed with her gloves. "I've promised my next dance to him."

She'd done so reluctantly, having hoped Maxwell would claim it. When he had not, she'd had no excuse to deny the baron's request.

The baron wasn't bad looking. He wasn't as good looking as Maxwell. But aside from the mean comment he'd made at the Darlington ball, he seemed kind enough. Her mother had pointed out that the Dankworth country

seat was only a few hours' ride from Breaker's Cottage.

Caroline sighed and then followed Goldie back into the ballroom, feeling increasingly deflated. Her only relief came in knowing this was to be her last dance. After the meal was served, she would ask her mother if they could go home.

And upon seeing Maxwell, or this version of Lord Helton, dance the night away with nearly every wallflower in the room, that escape could not come too soon.

"My lady." Baron Dankworth appeared, taking her hand and bowing. "My dance, I believe?"

"Yes. Thank you." Caroline dipped into a half-hearted curtsy.

He looked to lead her onto the floor but paused. "The room's grown considerably warm, has it not? Would you mind if we stepped outside for some air?"

She should not walk alone at a ball with a gentleman who was not a relation. She should insist upon participating in the dance or locate a chaperone.

And yet, the door leading to the terrace had been closed after a cool breeze had extinguished some of the candles. As a consequence, the room had grown stuffy.

Caroline found the pitying stares even more stifling.

And if she had to endure one more snub from the high and mighty Lord Helton, she'd scream.

"I don't mind at all," she answered, and her partner immediately changed directions.

Outside, however, he didn't linger on the terrace. "It's even cooler in the garden."

Caroline considered resisting, but the Chaswicks' garden was known to be one of the loveliest in all of Mayfair. Perhaps she could write an article describing which flowers had bloomed...

"This way." Lord Dankworth steered them onto one of the darker paths.

"I'd prefer to keep near the house," she made a mild protest.

"But you must see the fountains and the folly. No one will notice your absence. This is one of the longest sets of the evening." The walkway was so narrow he moved her in front of him but didn't release her hand.

This isn't right, something inside her seemed to say, a sense of unease pricking up hairs on the back of her neck. But she wanted to see the fountains and the folly. She didn't want to go back inside.

She definitely didn't want to watch Max dance with yet another debutante.

"Very well. But we need to be quick about it."

They emerged from the trees, but there was no fountain. There was no folly. And before she realized what she'd gotten herself into, her back was pressed against a stone wall, and the baron's mouth covered hers.

"Mmpff!" Her hands landed on his chest and she tried pushing him away.

"What's wrong?" He pulled back just enough for her to turn her face away from him. "You said you wanted to go walking..." She felt something hard pressed against her belly at the same time she realized he tasted and smelled of whisky.

Caroline shook her head as much as the embrace allowed. "*Walking*," she

insisted, straining even as she felt his mouth on her neck. “*I said walking.*”

“Everyone knows what ‘walking’ means.” She felt his lips move over her skin. She didn’t want this man kissing her. She barely knew him! Why, oh why hadn’t she listened to that inner voice that tried warning her?

“Stop! Stop *now.*” She would scream if he didn’t do as she asked.

An unexpected wave of nausea hit her.

People would come outside, see her alone with a gentleman, and know she’d acted irresponsibly. They wouldn’t care that she’d believed the invitation to walk in the garden to be an innocent one, and the *ton’s* tenuous acceptance would be revoked once and for all.

She would disappoint her mother. Embarrass her brother. Ruin her sisters...

Lose her job.

Her panic built, her muscles tightening with it as her heart clenched, the threat of tears stinging at her eyes. She could not attract attention, but she *could not* allow this to happen.

So, she would have to get away on her own.

The baron was half-drunk, stronger and larger than she was, but uncoordinated. And there was one area where she knew all men were vulnerable. She raised her knee and...

“The lady asked you to stop.” Maxwell’s familiar voice broke through at the exact moment her knee slammed into Lord Dankworth’s offensive appendage, and suddenly she was free.

Shaking, Caroline stumbled back, into the wall but away from the man she’d believed was trustworthy when he was really a pervert and a liar and a

hideous, repulsive person!

Utterly disgusted with the male half of her species, she glanced between the two men, one bent over, moaning and the other looking angry and ominous. But between the baron's insidious attack and Maxwell Black ignoring her all evening, neither deserved to be as upset as she was.

"I consented to walking through the garden." Her voice shook as she addressed Lord Dankworth. "Nothing more." Unexpected energy surged through Caroline as she pushed away from the wall.

"And *you*..." She pointed a finger in Maxwell's direction, not sure what to accuse him of. His following her outside could not have been a coincidence. Or was it? "You!" Words failed her. She stomped one slippers foot and turned, intent upon storming off.

She would have succeeded, if not for Max's hand snaking out to halt her.

"Are you all right?" Holding her close, Caroline caught hints of his breath, which was spicy and minty. Maxwell's touch, she noticed, was reassuring rather than threatening.

That, along with a massive sense of relief, made her knees go weak.

Her anger drained away as quickly as it had come, taking that strange burst of energy with it. It was practically impossible to stay cross with the person ensuring she remained upright.

"I wouldn't think that would matter to you." Shifting a wary glance to where the baron was standing once again, her voice caught.

Maxwell cursed—saying a word out loud that she'd only read before. "Are you hurt? Did he hurt you?"

"I'm fine." Caroline answered. When he lifted a brow, she exhaled. "It

was just a kiss. I'm fine. Really," she insisted. "I'm fine."

He waited a moment, and then seemed to accept her answer before addressing the man she'd foolishly trusted.

"Bother Lady Caroline again and you'll be damn sorry. Is that understood?"

"Or any other lady!" Caroline added, safely tucked against Maxwell's front.

"Or any other lady," he agreed.

"She consented—" Dankworth began to make excuses but Maxwell wasn't having any of that.

"She consented to walk with you. Nothing more." Maxwell's voice came out low and deadly sounding, and a second later, Caroline heard the baron's footsteps receding as he fled.

If she were the baron, she would have fled too, as her employer was half a foot taller and at least three stones heavier than the other man. Her sudden awareness of his very... maleness sent a shiver through her.

Even so, she wasn't ready to forgive him.

Yet.

"I'm mad at you," she said.

"I know." He tucked her head under his chin, tightening his hold on her.

"All night—" Caroline inhaled. She couldn't exactly complain that he hadn't danced with her. But... "You were rude. I don't deserve that." Especially from him.

"I know." His hands smoothed down her back and Caroline felt herself melting into him.

“I thought you were my friend.”

“I am.”

“I didn’t want him to kiss me,” Caroline admitted.

“Do you want me to go after him? I’m not opposed to planting him a facer.”

Caroline considered it but then shook her head, reluctant to leave his embrace.

“I didn’t want him to touch me.” The moment she’d realized she was in trouble returned, and panic flashed in her mind. “I didn’t know... I never expected—”

“You don’t need to explain yourself to me. He’s in the wrong. And if I hadn’t been such an ass tonight, this never would have happened.”

His not-quite apology reminded her of his cool demeanor, and she tilted her head back to search his eyes.

“Why?” Caroline asked. “Why would you act like an... *ass* when we’re supposed to be friends?”

He fell silent for so long Caroline thought he wouldn’t answer. But then he exhaled.

“Because.” His jaw ticked. “I’m no better than Dankworth.”

She frowned. “Of course you are.”

He grimaced, shaking his head, and then suddenly gripped her chin. “If I was,” he said. “I’d have escorted you back to your mother by now. But instead, I want...”

“What?” Licking her lips, Caroline didn’t even think of resisting him. “Tell me what you want.”

“This.”

And when Maxwell Black claimed her mouth with his, Caroline parted her lips. Because she wanted this kiss.

More than she'd wanted anything in a very long time.

WOULDN'T... SHOULDN'T...



The moon cast a silvery glow upon the secluded garden, its radiance illuminating Caroline's delicate features as she stood before him, bathed in ethereal light. Her eyes, once filled with bold confidence, now held a flicker of vulnerability, and Maxwell's heart tightened in response.

They had circled each other all night long, but despite the distance he'd tried to insert, this unspoken longing had only grown stronger.

"Caroline," he whispered. A gentle breeze drifted over them, causing a few strands of her hair to catch in his whiskers. He welcomed the sense of seclusion. Soft. Silky. Sensual.

She tasted sweeter than he'd imagined, and by God, kissing her sent him reeling. Had he realized it would be like this from their first meeting? When she'd chased her dog across the park rather than send her maid, but then harshly criticized his Gazette?

Perhaps. He didn't know. And pulling her closer amidst the sweet blossoms of the night, he didn't care.

"Yes?" He drew back just long enough for her to answer.

"Yes," she whispered back, her arms tightening around his neck, encouraging this intimacy with all her senses.

He'd come to the ball with the best of intentions—to dispel any rumors while ensuring no one bothered her, but then failed miserably at both.

Firstly, because Baron Dankworth was a worse gossip than any of the dowagers present. And secondly, because when he watched Dankworth lead her outside—beyond the terrace—his plans to avoid his lovely society writer flew right out the door with her.

On and off, all night, he'd felt her watching him, confused at first, then hurt, then angry. She sure as hell would not have put herself in such a vulnerable position if he'd acted on his instincts—if he'd allowed himself to claim a dance or two, sat with her for supper, and then stolen her away.

So she could oversee the final galleys, of course.

He'd meant to prove Winterhope wrong about his feelings for this woman, but in the end... He couldn't.

Now he knew why.

Her smile lifted his heart. Her kiss lit a burning desire in him.

And now, after getting a taste of this exceptional woman, detaching again was going to be even harder.

Perhaps even impossible.

Her form molded to his as though they'd been made for one another. Soft breasts pressed against his chest. He flexed a hand as his cock hardened like steel. He wanted... so much more. But anyone could appear at any moment and although he had nothing to lose, she did.

He exhaled a rough breath, and required all his self-control to abandon the velvety warmth of her mouth.

“We shouldn't. I know.” Her melodic voice broke the silence. She was

innocent—too innocent!

If Maxwell was the gentleman she believed him to be, he'd be meeting with her brother come morning. His actions demanded it. But he wasn't. And he'd not force any woman to live the lie he'd grown accustomed to.

He loosened his arms, fighting his baser instincts. "We shouldn't," he agreed. "Do you require a moment to collect yourself?"

She blinked, the moonlight shining in her blue eyes. Her lips shiny and swollen.

"I..." She shook her head, confused—again, because of him. She deserved some sort of explanation.

"I can't offer for you." She stiffened as he searched for the words to explain himself. "I can't..." He couldn't tell her why.

"I don't expect you to." She brushed silky strands of hair away from her face with a shaking hand, the helpless gesture nearly crumbling his resolve. And then she took a step back, leaving his embrace. "Thank you for your assistance."

"Caroline—it's not..."

"It's fine." She held out a hand to halt his apology. "I'm fine."

The irony of it all—aside from looking a little disheveled—she was. He'd come along to save her at the precise moment she saved herself.

Maxwell reached out but stopped. "Your hair needs—"

"Oh!" She drew out a few pins, finger-combed the length, and before he'd had his fill of those silky tresses, twisted it into another knot, this one simpler than before. Most gentlemen wouldn't notice the difference. Most ladies, however, would.

“It’s not...” He winced. “Shall I send Lady Standish out to assist you?” In the face of her predicament, he couldn’t remember feeling this helpless.

“No!” Caroline shook her head. “I don’t want anyone to know. Not about you, but...” She glanced in the direction in which Dankworth had vanished. And then her expression crumpled.

Maxwell caught her hand. “It’s not your fault,” he said, but he could tell she didn’t believe him.

And he could not leave until they’d cleared this up. “You did nothing wrong.”

“I ought not to have walked outside without a chaperone. I had a feeling... but I was angry. I didn’t think he would...” She dropped her lashes. “If anyone finds out... If he tells anyone.”

“He won’t.” Because Maxwell was going to make a visit to the baron’s residence.

Maxwell knew there were some amongst the *ton* who considered him harmless—safe. In fact, he liked it that way.

But there were enough who also knew he made for a dangerous enemy. Baron Dankworth would soon be one of them.

DUTY TO SHARE



The morning after the ball, Caroline shot out of bed the second she woke up, appalled at the predicament she'd gotten herself into.

Having spent the first half of the previous evening worrying over and watching Maxwell Black and then, after his abrupt departure, trying to convince her mother to leave early, Caroline had forgotten something very, very important.

She had failed to dig up any good gossip—let alone evidence—for the articles she needed to write that afternoon! Alarmed that she'd slept as late as she did, she tore around the room and by the time Eloisa arrived to assist her, Caroline was already fully dressed. She perhaps didn't look as elegant as she ought to, but there was no time to waste!

"I'm so sorry, my lady, I assumed you'd have a good lie-in after such a late night." Eloisa frowned. "Are you sure I can't smooth that out for you? Or perhaps you would want to change in to one of your new ones?"

But looking perfect was the last of Caroline's concerns. It wasn't as though she had anyone to impress—but then she froze.

Maxwell Black had kissed her! And it hadn't been a polite sort of kiss. He'd put his tongue in her mouth—he'd pressed his body against hers.

She took two steps backward and caught her reflection in the vanity mirror. Dark circles shadowed her eyes, and her hair looked like a few birds were making their home in it.

“Perhaps... you could help with this.” She touched her hair and then sat, bouncing one foot while Eloisa took her time brushing through the tangled mass and then twisting several lengths into braids to wind around Caroline’s head.

After the last pin went in, Caroline went to stand, but Eloisa put a hand on her shoulder and then cleared her throat... harsh lines forming when she frowned meaningfully at something on Caroline’s neck.

Caroline leaned closer to the glass.

Scratches. From Maxwell’s whiskers? And a small bruise. A tremor ran through her.

“Oh. Erm... Is there anything you can...?”

“Give me a moment.” Eloisa stepped away to pour a few oils into the washbasin and then quickly returned to hold a cool cloth over the irritated skin. “Are you... unharmed, my lady?”

“Of course. I’m perfectly fine.” And she was! As long as she didn’t think about it.

Over the course of one hour, she’d had her first kiss, disarmed the man who’d stolen it, and then kissed the man she’d wished had been her first.

Afterward, he’d escorted her to the terrace door and then ordered her to return to her mother.

His bossiness had been almost barbaric, and she’d have argued with anyone else who dared to take control like that, but with Maxwell...

It was different.

Despite his awful behavior throughout the ball, she'd forgiven him. Even after he'd said he couldn't make an offer, she'd forgiven him.

He'd sounded haunted when he'd pulled away. Almost lonely.

"I need to go down, Eloisa." Caroline tilted her head to the side while the maid finished dabbing something to hide the bruise and then slid off the chair impatiently. But then... Caroline froze, her gaze meeting Eloisa's in the mirror. "You won't tell anyone, will you?"

The maid rolled her lips together and then shook her head. "No, my lady. I'm your maid, so don't you worry. Your secrets are safe with me."

"Thank you." Caroline exhaled. "I'll be at the newspaper most of the day, so you should take the day off. I'll let Mother know."

"That isn't necessary, my lady."

"Yes. I think it is." Caroline tucked her notebook and pencil into a small bag and swept out of the room. After bidding her maid a good day, she made her way toward her nearest source of information.

"Good morning." Caroline burst into the morning room where Mrs. Rutherford and both younger sisters sat drinking tea and breaking their fast. Caroline didn't make a plate for herself until after she'd kissed her mother's cheek.

"Mother says you danced most of the night away," Caroline's youngest sister, Josephine, looked thrilled as she made the announcement. Their parents had brought five children into this world. Two sons and three daughters.

And Josephine was the most beautiful.

But she also knew it.

“I did. For once, I was not a wallflower.” Caroline turned from the buffet and carried her plate to the table where she then took her usual spot.

“Yes! Yes! If you marry this season, and Melanie marries next year, I can have my come-out while I’m still young and beautiful.” Josephine’s confidence knew no bounds.

Caroline frowned in mock offense. “What am I then, an old hag?”

“Mother also says you disappeared during the supper dance.” Melanie interrupted, sounding far more serious. “With Baron Dankworth.”

Melanie knew what Josephine was too young to understand—their reputations were all tied to one another’s.

Their mother glanced up from the newspaper and frowned at her two younger daughters. “Mother,” she said, “Can speak for herself.”

She then turned to Caroline. “But I am curious, Caroline, as to where you went off to? Alone? You know better than that.”

Caroline hated the fact that her mother was right. But sitting across from both her sisters, Josephine so very eager to enter society and Melanie so very quiet and serious, Caroline knew she couldn’t allow them to ever make the same mistake she had.

“I was to dance with Baron Dankworth,” Caroline began. Maxwell had told her she’d not done anything wrong. But she had! “He suggested we go outside onto the terrace instead. When he suggested a walk in the garden, I agreed.”

“Oh, Caroline...” Concern flooded her mother’s expression. “You didn’t...”

Caroline shook her head. She would warn her sisters without telling them the sordid details.

“I didn’t. But he thought I would. He said I should have known that ‘walking’ meant... not really walking. As luck would have it, thankfully, Lord Helton also decided to take some air. His appearance prevented Lord Dankworth from... taking advantage.” Caroline met her mother’s stare. “I should have found you. I won’t make that mistake again.”

The shocked looks on her sisters’ faces proved she’d made her point.

“But. You are unharmed?”

“I am fine. As I said, Lord Helton came along at the perfect moment.”

But then, Caroline had allowed Maxwell to take the same liberties Dankworth tried to steal.

That had been... unforgettable in a far better way. Her heart raced as she recalled how thick his hair felt beneath her hands, how hard his chest felt pressed against hers.

Caroline forced her thoughts to cold baths, the hypocrisy of the *ton*, to anything but the memory of Maxwell’s kiss. Because she knew her mother. And her mother, unfortunately, had read her mind on more than one occasion. If Caroline allowed herself to dwell on that kiss, she’d be beet red.

Lizards.

Spiders.

She took a long sip of tea. “Anything interesting in the paper this morning?” she asked.

Following a short but rather stunned silence, her mother gestured toward an ironed copy of the Gazette. “Mistakes throughout.”

Caroline sighed, disappointed but not surprised. “I wanted to be there. I would have been there, but...” Nobody missed the Chaswick ball. Certainly not the Gazette’s society writer. “Did you, by chance, hear anything er, *newsworthy*, last night?”

Her mother’s brows shot up. “I suppose you were too busy dancing to converse with the other debutantes?”

“They are so young...” Caroline winced. “But yes. I can always ask Goldie...” In fact, Goldie and Reed’s was to be her first visit after breakfast.

“No, Reed’s taking her for a drive in the country today. And then they’re to attend another exhibit. I got the sense they wouldn’t be returning until late.”

“But—”

“I did hear something about Lord Darlington’s eldest, but nothing definitive.”

“His father married a lady’s maid, I hardly think they’ll be scandalized by him dancing three times with some viscount’s foreign cousin...” Caroline had heard several versions of this story, none of which could be proven. “I need something else.”

“Hmm...” The room fell silent but for the clinking of porcelain and sipping of tea, until Melanie spoke up. “Why not write about Lord Dankworth’s behavior?”

They all froze.

Was her sweet, quiet, timid sister really suggesting that Caroline write about her ill-advised encounter in the garden?

“The other society pages leave names out of articles all the time...”

Melanie added.

She was not wrong. And although Caroline had come into her position intent on absolute transparency and accuracy, there were some circumstances where discretion was not only accepted but expected. And yet...

She had a duty to share something this important with other ladies, and if she could do that while still protecting her and her family's reputation...

"I'll think about it," she said. And then, gulping down the rest of her tea, she pushed her chair away from the table before the footman could do it for her and stood to leave. "I need to get to work. Don't wait up for me!"

"Do be careful, Caroline!" her mother said. "If not for Reed, I would not allow this, you know."

"I know." Her mother was being a good sport, really. "But you also know how intelligent and level-headed I am." Caroline gathered up her bag and backed toward the door.

"And stubborn!"

Yes, her mother knew her very well.



CAROLINE HAD BEEN at work for several hours, first writing her articles and then, once those were finished, assisting Mr. Wallace with a few of the other reporters' stories. It was precisely what she'd wanted since she'd stepped through the door.

She didn't want to admit how disappointed she was that Maxwell hadn't arrived yet.

"Where do you think the mistakes are coming from, Mr. Wallace?" she asked late in the afternoon. The two of them were seated at one of the tables in the main workroom, doing final read-throughs of the articles written for

tomorrow's paper.

"I've done everything I can, but I always catch 'em too late. If I knew who was scrambling the type, I'd sure as hell do something about it." His expression darkened, and then he frowned. "Pardon my language, Miss Smith."

Caroline held the older man's stare. Of course, he knew who she really was.

"No offense taken, Mr. Wallace," she said. *Scrambling the type...*

Before she could dwell on that thought, the door opened, and along with a fresh breeze, her favorite publisher ducked inside.

He was dressed so casually that, if she wasn't so very aware of this particular man, she might have mistaken him for one of the reporters. He wore a brown cap, a darker brown jacket, and breeches more suited to a tenant farmer.

But his black leather gloves... those belonged to a gentleman.

He almost reminded her of Reed before he'd inherited his title.

But Reed had never looked at her like Maxwell did. *Thank God!*

Maxwell's eyes blazed a bright green, and he looked to have been energized by whatever he'd been up to.

"Good afternoon." He held her gaze one second longer than necessary before turning to his editor. "Wallace. Do you have the list of today's stories?" He disappeared into his own office, removing his gloves as he did so, with Wallace trailing after him.

Because they were at work.

He was her employer—nothing more.

Well, he was also her friend. Or had he said he wasn't?

Caroline forced herself to focus on the story she'd been going over.

And then... butterflies swarmed her chest.

Glancing up, she confirmed what she already knew. He'd come back into the room. With his sleeves rolled up and wearing his spectacles, he appeared more impressive than the loftiest duke.

Caroline exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding and met his stare. Was she crazy to think he could speak to her with nothing more than his eyes?

"About this story..." He held a familiar piece of paper in one hand. Her story. "We needn't print it. It isn't necessary."

"You disapprove?" Before she could defend it, he was shaking his head.

"No. That's not it at all. It's good. Probably one of your best. But if anyone were to get wind of who this unsuspecting debutante was... I just don't want you to risk it. Dankworth no longer poses a threat."

She had written both subjects anonymously. But wait... "What do you mean? *Dankworth is no longer a threat...*?"

Maxwell looked down at his feet and then back up. "Suffice it to say he's no longer a resident of England. He'll likely never see the article. And unfortunately, I'm afraid it wouldn't bother him if he did."

"You think I wrote it to punish him?"

"Why else would you risk your reputation?" He touched a thumb to his lower lip, studying her. And then his eyes flared as he realized her motivation. "It is a warning?"

"Yes." Caroline hated the heat she felt in her neck. "I was foolish. Other

young ladies needn't make the same mistake." She stared at the article she'd been trying to read, not wanting to talk about it, and was surprised when he lowered himself into the chair beside her.

"Caroline. I don't know if I want to kiss you or strangle you." Exasperation sounded in his voice, but when she met his gaze, she had no doubt it was an affectionate kind.

Kiss me then. But she would never say it out loud.

He glanced around and, without warning, leaned forward and kissed her.

It was too quick, and nothing like last night, but they weren't alone in a romantic garden setting.

Which, in an ironic sort of way, lent more meaning to this kiss. Because it was daylight. And they were in their place of work.

"Matilda needs some maintenance, so I'll be in the press room if you need me." Another hurried kiss. "Don't work too hard."

"I won't." She wasn't sure that was possible.

He turned and left as abruptly as he'd arrived. It was something she was learning about him. If there was something to be done, he got right to it. He wasn't all that different from Reed, and Caroline couldn't help but respect that.

He'd bought the paper and upgraded the equipment in less than one year. All with no disruptions in distribution—errors notwithstanding.

Now it seemed that he hadn't wasted any time dealing with the man who'd attempted to force himself on her.

A smile danced on her mouth as she went back to her reading. Because he might not be able to offer for her, but he liked her.

And he'd kissed her again.

Twice.

OFF-LIMITS



*M*ax tightened the screw he'd replaced and wiped his arm across his brow.

He hadn't intended to kiss her again. In fact, he'd arrived at the office quite determined not to.

And then he'd read her article, a story that put her own reputation on the line purely for the benefit of others, and he couldn't help himself. The more he knew her, the better he liked her.

If he were to list the characteristics of the perfect woman, she'd have all of Caroline's qualities.

If such a woman existed.

And so, he'd kissed her.

Twice. If they had any privacy, he may very well have kissed her a third time. Hell, he might have succumbed to urges he had no business entertaining.

Max frowned and shifted in an effort to subjugate his blasted jolly whacker. Just contemplating all the things he'd like to do with Caroline Rutherford wasn't just making his trousers uncomfortably tight, but also impeding him from making the repairs he'd set out to finish. The next time he

was alone, he'd settle for his own hand—a thought which would be laughable if it wasn't so damned pathetic.

Malum had reminded him that morning that Max was always welcome at the emporium. And that was all well and good. Many gentlemen would have taken the duke up on such an invitation. But not Max.

He didn't want just any woman, he wanted *this one*.

Worse than that, he *liked* her.

Which was all the more reason to leave her be, step away so an authentic gentleman could court her.

But the thought of *that* was so utterly repulsive, he was shaking his head.

"Hell no."

"What?" Wallace shot Max, who hadn't realized he'd spoken the words out loud, a curious glance.

"Just getting this bolt on here..." Now he was talking to himself—in front of his other employees, no less. He clamped his mouth shut and forced all his concentration on the task at hand.

Over the next few hours, the composers finished setting their pages while Wallace and the reporters waited for the galley proof. Just as Max considered going upstairs to check on her, Caroline entered from outside.

"I thought everyone could use a little nourishment," she announced, but the appearance of the picnic basket had already captured the attention of everyone who wasn't hard at work and a few who were.

She met Max's stare from across the room. "If that's all right?"

Max dipped his chin. "Will you meet me in my office?"

"Now? Of course. Just give me one moment." She'd opened the basket

and removed two items wrapped in linen from a pile of several similar bundles. Of course, she wouldn't arrive with food only for herself.

But, to get it, she must have left without telling him. Alone. Something he wasn't at all pleased about. It seemed that for now, anyhow, he was taking on the role of her protector.

Max wiped the oil from his hands and, since he couldn't stand around waiting for her, marched out of the room alone.

And then heartily approved when she quickly followed.

"It's not anything special." She went about clearing off a section of his desk and then proceeded to lay out the spread she'd pillaged from the basket before coming up. "Pigeon pies, some bread and cheese, some summer cabbage. Oh! And Mother sent pastries, so we'd have something sweet..."

"So you didn't leave to fetch it?"

"No, Mother sent it over." Her words loosened his chest. This woman... He was beginning to believe she'd be the death of him.

Caroline sent him a smile that had him forgetting his own name, and then went back to opening the pies—and setting out cutlery, even.

She looked quite pleased with herself and even though Maxwell ought to argue that she was bound to be exposed if her mother continued sending banquets to the office, he didn't have the heart to.

Furthermore, he was hungry. Both for her company and the food.

After she'd set out a tempting meal, she stood up straight and clasped her hands behind her back. "Did you need me for anything particular?"

He stared at her, distracted by the purplish bruise on her forehead and around her eyes. "Good to see it's fading."

When she looked confused, he pointed at his own forehead. “From the door.”

“Oh. Yes. Eloisa, my maid, mixes this amazing paint to cover blemishes —” She caught herself, moved her hands to her waist, and tilted her head in the other direction. “But I’m sure that’s not why you wanted me in your office,” she reminded him. “Is something wrong?”

He never should have kissed her. Because the words “*wanting her in his office*” suddenly took on an all-too-inappropriate meaning.

He removed his spectacles and pinched the bridge of his nose. He’d had a good reason. Hadn’t he? “Nothing’s wrong,” he said.

“So, what is it?”

“You don’t have to help Wallace, you know.” Max sat behind his desk, making it easier to keep his hands to himself. “Or bring food.” Only Caroline would take it upon herself to feed an office full of unrefined newspapermen.

“I know. But by helping him, I’m helping you.”

And by helping Max, he presumed, she hoped to help her brother.

His gaze dropped to her hands, her fingertips ink-stained... Ah yes. “Speaking of, I need your help proofing tonight—but on one condition.”

“That’s why I’m here. What’s the condition?”

“You aren’t to leave the building without me.” He couldn’t put it past her to hail a hackney to take her back to her mother’s house alone. “Let me know when you’re ready and I’ll escort you. Yes?”

“I’m perfectly capable—”

“This is non-negotiable.”

For a moment, he thought she might argue. But she nodded. And then,

she closed the door and claimed the seat across from him. “Did you have a plan? For catching him?”

She was more single-minded than even he was.

“We’ll run two galleys. One before corrections and one after. I don’t usually take the time, but it’s the only thing I can think of.”

“We’ll do two proofs, then.” She sat up straight, serious as an apoplexy. “It’ll take longer, but I haven’t come up with anything else either.” And then she tore open one of the packages and bit into an aromatic pigeon pie.

Not like a dainty little debutante, but with the same relish as his other employees.

Max rubbed a hand across his mouth to keep from laughing.

Because although Caroline Rutherford might initially appear sweet and easygoing, that simply was not the case. True, she had some very sweet moments, but he was coming to realize the lady was, in fact, a force of nature.

“I’ll just have a few bites. If we’re going to read through the galleys twice, there’s no time to waste...”

But Max sat back. “No. Finish your meal.” There would always be work to do. “And thank you.” He waved around his own pie. “For this.”

“You’re quite welcome.” She exhaled, and some of her boundless energy subsided. “Mother knows it’s my favorite.”

“She knew you would be here late?” Max was rather startled any mother would allow her daughter so much freedom, but the Rutherfords weren’t the average Mayfair family.

For the next twenty minutes, he sat listening to Caroline talk about her

parents, her sisters and brothers, and the home she preferred in Willowbrook Springs. Her eyes dimmed when she spoke of her father and the other men who'd perished in that fire.

Despite her substantial losses last year, she had not lost hope. In fact, all the surviving Rutherfords had left a strong impression on him, especially with their bold presence in Mayfair.

When she'd finished, she brushed her hands and gathered up the napkins. Before rising to leave, however, she asked, "Was there anything else you wanted?"

You.

Her gaze locked with his, and it seemed they said more to one another in those two seconds than they had all evening. Max licked his lips. "I'll keep you appraised if anything comes up."

Wrong choice of words. He could only be thankful he was sitting behind his desk.

Caroline licked her lips. Max swallowed hard.

"Send for me when the first galleys are ready." He *needed* her out of his office. What he *wanted*, however, didn't matter. She was off-limits.

As was every other woman in the world.

FITTING IN



Caroline rubbed her eyes. She'd read over these articles so many times, she could hardly see straight. Just as Maxwell suggested, they'd proofed two separate galleys. And everything looked perfect.

She stood up, stretched, and needing a moment of peace and quiet, slipped out the back door.

But she was not alone. Because she, apparently, wasn't the only person with that idea.

The pressmen, along with half of the compositors, were milling around outside. They appeared to be sharing a flask.

This was... interesting...

Mentally putting names to the faces, Caroline allowed the door to close quietly behind her. "The fumes are quite strong." She spoke to no one in particular, explaining her presence while at the same time trying not to draw attention to herself.

"You get used to it." Fergus spoke quietly, offering her the flask.

Caroline hesitated, but the man gestured with it again. "It's the least we can do, seeing as you shared your meal with everyone."

Did this mean she was going to be accepted? If that was the case, she

couldn't risk losing their trust. If she refused Fergus's offer, she could report their drinking to their employer.

"I'm happy to." She smiled and accepted the very basic container of what she guessed to be... ah, yes. It was gin.

It burned all the way down her throat.

She glanced around the moonlit area. It was a narrow drive to what looked to have once been mews. "What's in there?" She pointed toward the older-looking building.

"An old press. Old issues of the paper. Mostly trash. Sometimes the boss keeps his horse in there." Fergus flashed her a shy smile.

"It's nice out here." Caroline tilted her head back so the breeze could cool her neck. When she tilted it back down, she was more than a little discomposed to see them all watching her. Well. She might as well make the most of this. "Do you gentlemen convene here every night?" She did her best to sound indifferent, not wanting them to suspect her of checking on them.

One of the compositors snickered, proving she'd failed.

The older pressman, Mr. Crenshaw, poked the snickering fellow in the side with his elbow.

"When it isn't raining," he answered. "We won't get a chance later on. Not after we start the presses up."

"You can't stop them?"

"We can. But that would put us behind. So we take this last break first."

"The Gazette is more dependable than the tide, or so they say," one of the other compositors added.

"Except for the mistakes," the snickerer added.

Caroline dipped her chin, her mind putting all the pieces together even as she smiled weakly. Because she had an idea. She inhaled, then exhaled, then smoothed her skirts and made an excuse to return inside.

The frames lay unattended, corrections supposedly in place, waiting to be attached to Matilda for the nightly run. Even with several gas lanterns burning, however, she couldn't actually read them. It was like trying to read with a looking glass.

Of which a miniature one might come in handy in the future.

“What are you doing?”

“Oh!” A long shadow draped itself across the room and, startled, Caroline touched her hand to her chest. “Mr. Jones, I didn't see you.” But she did not answer his question.

“Mr. Black doesn't want anyone touching those.” His gaze shifted to the ink-stained frames waiting to be loaded onto the press.

“I wouldn't dream of it,” Caroline said. And then she glanced around. “Has everyone else left?”

“Mostly. Except the boss and the pressmen, of course. A few of the compositors will wait to clean the letters after the run. But otherwise... There's no reason for everyone else to stay.” His eyes shifted to the frame again and then back to her suspiciously.

Caroline straightened up and then backed toward the door. Did the man think she'd been moving letters? She wouldn't, even if she knew how. “I promised Mr. Black I'd check with him before leaving... Goodnight, Mr. Jones!”

“Goodnight, Miss Smith.”

With most of the building in dark shadows, Caroline moved around the tables quickly and was relieved to find Max sitting inside his office—alone, but with the door open.

She paused in the threshold, because he wasn't just her employer, he was the man who'd kissed her the night before. And then twice today.

“Max?” He peered over his spectacles at the sound of his name. Seeing her, he lowered whatever he was reading and gave her his full attention.

She held his gaze as long as she dared, but when she was certain he could hear her breathing, she shifted her eyes to the window and then back.

He lifted his brows. “Are you ready to leave? I suppose I should send for a carriage.”

“No!” She scrambled inside and took the seat she'd used earlier. “We need to make another galley.”

“But we've proofed it twice already.” He frowned. “What is it? Did you notice errors in the frame?”

She was shaking her head. “I need a mirror to do that. Which ought to be the final proof and needs doing right before the pressmen set them for the night's run.”

Max nodded. “What made you think of this?”

Caroline explained about the gentlemen taking a break outside, and how the frame had been left unattended. “But we need to check the pages again before the pressmen load them up.”

Max was on his feet before she finished, rushing to the door, not stopping but glancing over his shoulder to ask, “So, no one is with the frames now?”

“Mr. Jones was on his way out. He said everyone else is gone... so no.”

Caroline practically ran to keep up with him and they arrived in the print room together just as Crenshaw and Fergus were locking one of the forms into place.

“Wait!” Max called out. The two burly men paused. Seeing Caroline behind their boss, they shot wary stares in her direction. “We need to make one more galley!” Max added.

And five minutes later, between Max, Caroline, and the two compositors, they discovered no less than twelve significant errors.

None of which had been there half an hour before.

The corrections required the remaining employees to work later, delaying the final run. But by the very early hours of dawn—Caroline had lost track of time by then—batches and batches of finished papers awaited delivery to the mail offices, paperboys, and various regions of London.

And for the first time in almost an entire year, the London Gazette was, quite literally, perfect.

A WALTZ



Tired but happy and perhaps more satisfied than she had been in a very, very long time, Caroline stuffed her notebook and pencils into her bag. Maxwell, who was checking the gas lanterns and extinguishing any forgotten candles, said he'd wait for her in his office. But then he shot her a warning look, sending a thrill coursing through her.

Because, of course, he'd forbidden her from leaving on her own.

An order Caroline was happy to follow.

"I'm almost afraid to check the papers. It's been so long since we've made it this late without finding new mistakes."

He hadn't waited for her in his office but stood in the doorway to the stairwell holding a single flint, his spectacles slightly crooked on his face, hair springing out from having run his fingers through it so many times.

He looked pleased—more than pleased. An inner sort of spark lit his green eyes, and he did nothing to hide his huge grin.

Caroline couldn't stop smiling either. Much more of this and her mouth would hurt in the morning. "I feel like we ought to celebrate."

"You aren't tired?" Max narrowed his eyes, but in a curious way, not angry-like.

“I am. I was. I just can’t imagine trying to sleep right now!”

Max strolled closer and shifted to rest his backside on one of the tables.

His eyes pinned on her.

“I have scotch in my office.”

Was he asking her to stay and share a drink with him? But... why else would he mention it?

“You want to have a drink before we leave?”

“It might help you sleep.” He was perfectly relaxed, just watching her.

“Yes. Yes, then.” She glanced around the room to ensure she wasn’t forgetting anything and then sighed. “I am just so very pleased! That edition is beautiful. One of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen!”

“Not the *most* beautiful.”

He was still staring at her.

He is not talking about me—no one had ever accused her of being beautiful. Tolerably pretty, yes. Intelligent—obviously. And of course, those fickle men at the last ball who’d told her mother she was lovely.

But never, never beautiful.

Giddy for a moment, she pushed herself away from the table and spun in a circle. And then she spun again, and before she could stop herself, she was up on her toes, dancing around the table.

“I thought you said you couldn’t waltz.” Max’s words halted her whimsical steps. Not because she heard disapproval, quite the opposite.

“I said the *ladies at Almacks* hadn’t given me the nod yet,” Caroline pointed out, all the while he closed the distance between them.

“Dance it with me, then.” The pitch of his voice was lower, gravelly-sounding.

There was no music, and the tables and chairs would be considerable obstacles. But she couldn't help herself.

Caroline gave a tiny nod, and then inhaled and gave a more deliberate one.

Slowly, and with their gazes locked, he placed one hand on her waist. Caroline lifted hers to his shoulder. When his other hand wrapped around hers, Caroline's breath hitched. That moment, that room, the two of them, became her entire world.

And then he was guiding her around the tables and chairs expertly, like she knew he could.

She ought to be chastely sitting in a hackney, nearly home. Alone.

This was foolish. Silly. And, oh, it was wonderful.

She threw her head back and laughed. Warmth engulfed her chest, effervescing to her limbs, carrying little champagne bubbles. She'd known similar feelings before, but not recently.

And then, tears burned the back of her eyes and her throat thickened. Caroline swallowed hard, but it only thickened again.

Finishing a twirl, he caught her, pausing. “What is it?”

Without the distraction of other couples or music, he seemed to sense her change in mood immediately.

Caroline frowned, shaking her head. “I...I haven't felt this in over a year.” One tear spilled over. Without her hands free, she leaned forward and brushed her face on his jacket. “I forgot what this feels like.”

“Dancing?” His chest rumbled beneath her cheek.

“No.” And then it dawned on her and she leaned back. “Happiness. I feel happy.”

His mouth parted, as though she’d surprised him. And then he licked his lips.

“Since the fire?”

Caroline nodded.

“Well then,” he said. “That is worthy of a celebration, indeed.”

She expected him to resume dancing, but instead, his arms reached around her, pulling her close again.

Inhaling his unique scent, she slid her hands around his waist, her fingers tracing the sinewy muscles in his back. And loving his strength pressed all along her front, Caroline felt anchored. *Because of this man.* And with him keeping her from floating adrift, she could finally spread her wings.

Which made no sense, but also made perfect sense.

“Thank you,” she whispered. He didn’t have to hire her. He didn’t have to watch out for her at *ton* events.

But he had.

His fingertips touched her chin, tilting it up so he could see her face.

“Thank *you.*” His breath brushed her lips, and then it wasn’t just his breath.

Caroline closed her eyes, melting. This was more than just a kiss. He flicked his tongue at the corner of her mouth. He nipped at her bottom lip.

When he trailed his mouth along her jaw and down her neck, her bones turned to jelly, so she moved her hands to his forearms. “Max,” she said.

“Caroline,” he growled, one hand moving lower, squeezing the flesh of her bum.

“Maybe...” Her voice came out breathy. “Maybe we ought to have a taste of that scotch.”

Because, with every touch, every kiss, Caroline wanted to run her hands through his hair and taste his skin. She wanted to open her knees and invite him closer.

And, unfortunately, those were not the thoughts of a proper lady.

Max held her gaze, speaking that silent language again, before giving her one last spin, and then setting her free.

“Scotch it is.”

She would share one drink with him—to celebrate a mistake-free newspaper, but also that flash of joy—and then she would go home. To bed. Where she’d no doubt lie for hours imagining all sorts of inappropriate things.

By the time they arrived at his office, she’d very nearly regained her composure—and her sanity.

Max set the candle on the surface of his desk. “Should I light a few more?”

As it was, this single flickering flame cast looming shadows that exaggerated the height and strength of Maxwell Black. A true gentleman, she’d learned, who was also a very decent person, one who worked hard when it was necessary, and by his actions with Lord Dankworth, had proven to be a loyal friend.

He had told her he couldn’t marry, even if he found the perfect woman.

What did that leave for the two of them? Friendship? Something else?

While a dozen different possibilities cluttered her thoughts, Maxwell poured generous portions of scotch into two glass tumblers. He handed her one, and then lifted the other towards her. "To perfection," he said.

"Perfection," she echoed.

But standing there, his eyes caressing her face, Caroline was not at all sure he was referencing the newspaper.

THE FIRST TIME



Max didn't require scotch to make him feel heady. His paper was finally being delivered error-free, the sun was about to rise, and he was alone with a beautiful woman.

Not only beautiful, but witty, and intelligent, and... genuine.

Caroline.

He'd damn near burst into tears when she said she'd forgotten how happiness felt.

Holding the lip of his glass to his mouth, he watched while she took a tentative sip of hers. "Careful, Sweetheart. Not too much."

He might as well have saved his breath. Because she rolled her eyes and then took a healthy gulp. But rather than fall immediately into a fit of coughing, she maintained her composure, even if her eyes watered and her flawless skin turned a delicate pink.

"Not your first time?"

"Not my first time."

Max tossed back the entire contents of his and then solidly set the glass back onto his desk. "How else should we celebrate?"

And she laughed, not the joyous laughter he'd heard upstairs, but the

disbelieving kind.

Her gaze locked with his and Maxwell knew exactly what she was thinking.

“You are, you know,” he told her. *Beautiful.*

“You don’t have to say that.” She wasn’t being coy. Max knew her well enough to realize that about her. Because, although this woman had shown great courage in coming to him for a job, and never doubted her writing abilities—or editing ones—she lacked confidence in herself as a woman.

“I don’t say things I don’t mean.” The force to touch her was stronger than gravity, and Max couldn’t help but move closer. “You’re the most beautiful woman I know.” The words surprised him, but he meant them. Yes, that delicate blush excited him, and he couldn’t stop looking at her cupid’s bow mouth, but he saw her whole person.

Max dropped his hands to her hips and backed up so he was partially sitting on his desk.

She stepped into the space between his legs and having her there felt as natural as breathing.

But it wasn’t enough. “Come here.” He drew her closer and she surprised him by carefully removing his spectacles and then, ever so deliberately, touching her mouth to his.

In that second, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he’d never enjoy kissing a woman as much as this one—with or without the spice of scotch warming her tongue.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, making him laugh.

“Are you?” His mouth lingered over hers.

“There are some pastries left.” But she’d tilted her head back, allowing him to taste the underside of her chin, her chest, and one of his favorite places on a woman, the little dip in the curve where her shoulder met her neck. Her body trembled. Was she shaking?

She exhaled a little cry, her hands clutching his biceps, holding him close.

“Mmm...” Her throat vibrated beneath his tongue, bringing every cell of his body to life.

Specifically, the ones in his groin.

“We should probably—” Her voice hitched. “Make a plan to catch whoever’s been doing it. Oh, oh!”

Max tested the weight of one of her breasts. It fit his hand perfectly.

Perfect. Much more of this and he’d believe in fate.

Slim fingers clutched his head, her fingers tugging at the roots of his hair.

Did she realize how that affected him?

Max needed desperately to see her hair loose again, soft and flowing around her face like a silken veil.

They both ignored the sounds of pins dropping onto the floor. When he’d removed them all, he unwound the knot at the back of her head and combed it down, relishing the silken feel under his palm, around his fingers. Although her hair was mostly brown, a few burnished strands sparkled in the candlelight. “So beautiful.” For a newspaperman, he was showing an embarrassing lack of originality as far as his words were concerned.

But he didn’t want to think. He simply wanted to touch her, to be close to her. To know her taste, her scent—the sounds she made when she came.

It was just the two of them, and suddenly, he was grateful he’d ignored

Malum's offer and other similar invitations.

"Caroline." He slid off the desk, spun them around, and lifted her to sit there instead, not allowing more than half an inch between their mouths.

"I like when you kiss me." Her voice was little more than a whisper but Max loved that she would admit this.

"I like kissing you," Max murmured back, his mouth grazing the skin above her bodice.

Caroline leaned back, arching and catching herself with her hands. Max turned his face, scraping his whiskers over the fabric of her gown. Her breath fluttered and he could hear her heart pounding.

"How do you suggest we catch him?" Max played along, not wanting to break this spell they'd fallen under.

"Him?"

"Our villain." Max dragged one hand along her cheek. "You fascinate me, you know?" He drew an imaginary line with his fingertip from her ear to her lips. When he applied gentle pressure to the lower one, she parted them, allowing him inside.

And then the minx sucked on the tip, pulling him inside.

"Caroline." He did not disapprove, but... Could she feel how hard he was? He watched as her lips closed around a single finger. He felt a tug of suction, and this time, it was his breath that shook.

"We shouldn't." His protest was weak.

She released his finger, causing a little popping sound. "It's just a celebration." She smiled. So damn brilliant, his breath caught in his throat.

"Everyone should celebrate their victories." A clock chimed from

somewhere on the opposite side of the building, and sounds of a single carriage outside reminded him he was supposed to take her home.

But he wasn't ready. "Are you tired yet?" His words were muffled because he had his mouth open, sliding along the fabric that hugged her slim figure, her hips, her breasts... Max tilted his head back to see her expression.

"No." Her eyes were half-closed, but not because she was sleepy. She was as aroused as he was... She deserved to celebrate as much as he did.

Or was he simply rationalizing the situation?

But then she raised her legs, wound them around his waist, and locked her ankles there, effectively trapping him.

He wasn't really trapped. He was home. The odd thought accompanied her invitation.

He'd take her up on it, but not in the way she might have imagined.

Skimming his hands down her sides, around her hips and over her thighs, Maxwell dropped to his knees.

"What—"

Max cut her off when he tugged her into the perfect position, still seated on the desk but on the very edge. To keep her from falling, he then arranged her skirts so her knees could rest on his shoulders.

His heart raced when he found himself cloaked in darkness, and even though he was anxious to taste her, he wanted to *see* her.

Gathering the fabric, he arranged it higher, around her hips. She immediately covered herself with one hand, and Max nearly cried in disappointment. But if she wanted him to stop, he would stop.

The sky outside had changed from an inky blue to a soft lavender, leaking

a glimpse of orange light. And in that light, Max saw hesitation in her eyes.

“My apologies. I’ll—”

“It’s not that. But, I don’t understand.” She licked her lips. “This isn’t what I thought...” And yet, she hadn’t arranged the gown modestly. She simply stared at him.

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

And oh, so very slowly, she drew her hand away, revealing her most intimate place to him.

He’d take that as a ‘yes’.

And her trust released an abundance of emotions, both wanted and unwanted, tumbling around his chest, his head, and of course, his cock. A few weeks ago, he hadn’t known this woman existed. But recently, more and more, her presence in his life was becoming a necessity.

She evoked desire, hunger, pride, and affection, not to mention a powerful urge to protect her from every other male walking the earth.

He leaned forward and kissed her. He didn’t tease or tantalize, but pressed his mouth to her center. She jerked, but was clutching the sides of his head, so he gripped a thigh with one hand and used his other to draw feathery lines along her crease.

She groaned, and the thought crossed his mind that he’d give her anything she wanted, take her to the ends of the earth if she wished.

Everything he had was hers.

A CELEBRATION



Caroline had secretly known similar sensations at home, in her own bed, evoked by her own hand. But they had been... a mere shadow of what she felt now. Because this was real. *Max was real.*

But also... *a dream.*

“Do you like this?” Max stopped just long enough to hold her gaze.

Caroline nodded.

She watched his thumb, smoothing her flesh, parting her opening. “This?” he asked.

“Yes.” That one word barely sounded human. She lost all ability to speak when he dipped a finger inside. The feeling was a fantastic stretching, the scratching of an itch she didn’t know she’d had.

Caroline knew this wasn’t the behavior of a proper lady—especially not an unmarried one. But she might never marry. And if she did, she doubted she’d find anyone she liked as much as Maxwell Black.

Or trusted as much.

Or wanted as much.

She would not stop him. This night was special. It was magical. Overwhelmed by this longing, she let her head fall back, closing her eyes. If

not for him holding her, she'd slide right off the desk and onto the floor. She might fall off the ends of the earth.

Relishing each stroke and kiss and taste, her breathing grew more and more shallow.

She might die if he stopped now.

The pace of his stroking grew faster, deeper. Like the most talented musician, he played her with precision. Kissing. Sucking. Rubbing.

Each breath came in little bursts while she reached for her completion. She grasped his hair tighter, moving her hips against him, not knowing what she wanted, just knowing she wanted more.

But he knew, and he pressed deeper, scraping his whiskers over tender flesh. "That's my girl," he said.

His voice spoken...there...sent fire shooting through her veins, hot, then cold, as her muscles clenched and spasmed.

She threw an arm over her head, knocking something off the desk. The glass tumbler shattered, but Caroline was powerless as sharp waves of pleasure washed over her. One by one, the powerful sensations stole her breath, her ability to think, her ability to move, until they finally ebbed.

A celebration, indeed.

When she'd finally relaxed, Max stilled.

Between her legs.

Caroline lay on the desk, her knees resting on Max's shoulders, and opened her eyes. The sun was rising and the pale light coming in the windows dimmed the shadows that danced on the ceiling. Watching them, Caroline waited for the certain mortification that would come.

But rather than tuck her away and suggest it was time to take her home, Maxwell rested his chin on her thigh, staring at her with a look that was nearly as dazed as she felt.

“Do you always celebrate like this?” she asked, a little embarrassed but not as much as she ought to be.

She felt too satisfied to be mortified.

“No.” He just kept staring at her, squinting slightly. “This is a first for me.”

Caroline pushed herself up so she was resting on her elbows. “Really?”

And then he winced a little. “Well. It’s not the first time I’ve pleased a woman, but it’s been a while. Certainly never here. And it’s never been... like this.”

The image of him with other women had her wishing she hadn’t asked. And yet, she couldn’t stop herself.

“How long?”

“Since before I bought the paper.”

“Is that normal?”

He laughed. “Depends on the man. I guess for me, it is.” He made a little smile, drew her skirts down so they once again covered her modestly, and while pushing himself to his feet, he helped her sit up.

“Are you all right?” His eyes held concern.

But she couldn’t help but notice the glistening of his lips and the way his thick black hair sprang out in all directions. Because of her.

“You must be a good swimmer,” she answered, eliciting a choked laugh from him.

“Why do you say that?”

Caroline gestured down, and then, flustered, circled one hand in the air. “I’d think one would require special... breathing techniques.”

His choked laugh turned into an uncontained one. He bent forward a little, shaking his head, and just when embarrassment finally threatened to set in, he took her in his arms.

“You. Are. Priceless.”



RIDING home in the carriage that Max had sent for earlier that evening, exhaustion finally found her. Perhaps it was because of the rhythmic rumbling of the wheels, or because she was tucked against Max’s warmth, but she’d nearly fallen asleep during the short ride that took her to her mother’s house.

And although he pressed a kiss to the top of her head before assisting her onto the pavement, he did not walk her to the door. As soon as Mr. Long opened it for her, the carriage was already rumbling away.

She knew why. If anyone were to witness him returning her home so early, alone, he’d have no choice but to offer for her—something he’d said he couldn’t—wouldn’t?—do.

“I’ll tell your mother’s maid that you’re home. She waited up until she could hardly hold her eyes open.” Mr. Long’s voice was quiet in the hush of the early morning.

Caroline didn’t have to look at the butler to know he disapproved. But did he disapprove because he knew she was working at the paper, or because he thought she was acting without discretion? Either, she supposed, would be considered problematic amongst anyone who valued propriety.

“Thank you, Mr. Long,” she said, too tired to offer an explanation or apology as she handed her gloves off to him. “Good night.” Though, with the sun already halfway up, it could hardly be considered “night” any longer.

Climbing the stairs, her eyes felt gritty and her limbs heavy, but her heart was light—if not a little confused.

And when she opened her door, she was actually happy to see Eloisa waiting for her.

“You needn’t wait up for me,” Caroline said. But Eloisa dismissed the admonishment and went right to work unfastening the gown she’d tugged on... yesterday?

If she kept going like this, Caroline would lose all track of time.

But oh, what a magnificent night it had been!

Eloisa drew the gown over Caroline’s head, leaving her in nothing but her chemise and short stays, and steered her to sit at the vanity. Caroline’s entire body relaxed as the maid undid the messy knot Caroline had refashioned and then tugged a brush through her hair. “Should we expect the Gazette to be laden with the same usual errors?” Eloisa asked, because apparently nothing was secret in this household.

On this morning, however, Caroline didn’t care. “Not today.” She answered cheerfully, grinning at her reflection.

“Excellent. And the other part? Were there any stories about His Lordship?”

His Lordship? Caroline blinked. Oh, right. *Reed*.

“Not a single word.” Yet another victory, but one that could only be attributed to luck. The question didn’t shake her, but the fact that she’d

forgotten all about her mission did—even if only temporarily.

“Your mother will be pleased.” Her mother, who’d already lost so much, who’d sent food for the entire Gazette staff, and who was allowing Caroline to break dozens of rules so they could protect Reed.

But who would be very disappointed if she knew what Caroline had been up to.

She exhaled. Her mother need never know.

Because today, Mrs. Rutherford would be pleased. And Caroline’s mission would begin again in a few short hours—with another paper to put together, more articles to write, an annoying saboteur to capture... and pesky Scotland Yard articles to be killed.

The tasks circled endlessly, making knots and bows, tightening around her.

“You’re like to fall asleep sitting there.” Eloisa practically lifted Caroline off the vanity bench. “Let’s get you out of this chemise and into a proper night-rail.”

But it was too late. Caroline had already slid under the covers and was hugging her pillows, eyes closed, happy to invite dreams of her day—and the night.

Because both had been good. And she could hardly wait to see Maxwell again.

BROTHERLY CONCERN



The trouble with sleeping late was that one didn't hear her brother pounding on the front door very early, or the conversations that took place in the morning room between the rest of her family.

Until, of course, said brother grew impatient and barged into Caroline's chamber.

Sensing she wasn't alone, Caroline's eyes fluttered open to see her annoying but beloved brother standing over her, a paper in his hands. The fact that it was today's edition of the London Gazette somehow fit the circumstances perfectly.

"Why?" he asked. His eyes, which were a lighter blue than her own, appeared more hurt than angry. "This is you, isn't it. Why didn't you come to me?"

Caroline blinked as her mind searched for the meaning behind his question. And then she saw which page the paper was open to.

The society article she'd written to warn other debutantes against agreeing to walk alone with gentlemen who appeared harmless.

She pushed herself onto her elbows, at a considerable disadvantage. "Can this not wait until I've had a cup of tea?"

“I shouldn’t have had to read it in the Gazette.” He twisted his mouth, his distaste obvious.

She knew she was going to have to fess up to what she was doing eventually, she just hadn’t foreseen these particular circumstances. But he’d found out—most likely from Goldie.

“It’s been taken care of.”

“By whom?” Reed’s eyes turned icy. “Not Black. Tell me it wasn’t that bastard Black.”

When Caroline didn’t answer right away, Reed dropped onto the edge of her bed. “We used to talk all the time. I don’t understand why you would go to him, of all people, to help you.”

Caroline tried sitting up all the way but couldn’t because she was trapped by her brother’s weight atop the counterpane. “Umph... Move so I can sit up, you baboon,” she grumbled, shoving until he shifted enough so she wasn’t trapped. “I assume you’re referring to my... encounter with Baron Dankworth.”

“Did you really write that? Why wouldn’t you come to me?” Caroline almost felt sorry for him.

“Don’t you have enough troubles of your own? Scotland Yard opened a new investigation into the fire. And yet, you haven’t told us anything about that. What are they saying? Is it really that serious?”

“A new witness came forward—says he personally saw me locking them inside.” Reed scrubbed a hand down his face. “He’s lying, of course. You know that as well as anyone.”

Caroline’s heart dropped. “I know that, and you know that, but unless you provide the truth, people will believe what they hear.”

“Or read.” He pinned an accusing stare. “And that, I suppose, is why you turned to Maxwell Black.” But then he shook the paper he was holding. “But this. This is different, Caroline. How could you go to him about something like this?”

She held his gaze steadily. “I *didn't* go to him.”

“What do you mean, you didn't go to him?”

“He... saw me leave the ball with the baron, suspected I might be in trouble, and came along in the nick of time.” Caroline didn't need to explain how she'd kneed her attacker in his private place. “And then... He took care of him.”

Her words left her brother silent.

Reed turned to stare out the window, and his shoulders slumped. “Huh,” he said.

“Lord Dankworth's left the country,” she added, just in case he thought he needed to defend her honor.

“I know. Because of Maxwell Black.” Reed turned back to study her. “But that begs the question, why? Why would he do that?”

Why? Well... Caroline searched for the best response. “Because I'm his society writer. If not for my job with the paper, I would not have gone walking outside.”

“I cannot believe you did that.” He threw his arms up. “What did you intend to do? Climb a tree hoping to see the next scandal to run in the Gazette?”

Before she could answer, however, the door cracked open and Goldie's face appeared. “Good morning, Caroline. The newspaper is absolutely

fabulous today.” Closing the door behind her, she shot her husband a knowing glance, and then an apologetic one in Caroline’s direction.

“I had to tell him, Caroline. When I read what happened, I remembered that it was you who’d missed the supper dance and...”

“Mother sent for me. I would have found out eventually,” Reed finished for his wife, reaching out and taking her hand almost as though he couldn’t be in the same room without touching her. “Black really took care of Dankworth on his own?”

“As far as I know,” Caroline answered. She hadn’t asked him for any details. He’d simply told her she needn’t worry, and she trusted him. “He’s not as bad as you think,” she added.

Reed made a scoffing sound but didn’t argue. Even he had to appreciate it when a gentleman took it upon himself to protect one of his sisters.

Taking advantage of what felt like a temporary truce, Caroline turned to Goldie. “How is your mother?”

But when Goldie’s face fell, she almost wished she hadn’t asked.

“Father sent her home—to Cross Castle.”

“Because of my stupid article?”

“I’m afraid so. I suppose he was bound to find out eventually.” Goldie sighed, forcing a weak smile.

Which meant Goldie would not be able to reconcile with her mother, and Goldie’s older sister would be alone for most, if not all, of her confinement.

All because Caroline had wanted to write a good story—a story that would be noticed. And it had been, only by the wrong person. “I’m so sorry —”

“Don’t blame yourself. Ultimately, it’s my father’s fault. Nia and I betrayed him, and he’s determined to punish us for it.”

“Words are powerful, Caro,” Reed added, which she found particularly annoying because that was what she’d been trying to tell him ever since they’d been forced to move to London.

But she was the one who’d exposed that the Duchess of Crossing had spent time with her daughters—all so she would have a story to write.

“I am so sorry. I promise to be more careful in the future.”

“You won’t have to be careful, because you’re finished writing articles for Black’s gossip section.”

Caroline pursed her lips. “Mother approves.” She loved Reed with all her heart, but he needed to realize she was her own person.

“She isn’t hurting anyone by writing them,” Goldie pointed out in soothing tones, one hand rubbing her husband’s back as she tugged him off Caroline’s bed.

Caroline intentionally looked away. Because following her... activities with Max, she suspected her brother and Goldie might embark on similar ones.

And she absolutely did not want that image burned into her brain.

“That’s not the problem, Sunshine.” Reed spoke in tones he reserved exclusively for Goldie. “You know that better than anyone.”

“Right, but no one even knows it’s her. They all think the articles were written by Lady Philomena.”

“Who the devil is that?”

“Nobody. She’s not real, love.” Goldie turned back to Caroline. “That

reminds me. I wrote these ideas down for you after the art exhibit last night.” She handed a piece of paper over, and Caroline could not have felt more grateful for her sister-in-law for what she saw.

The art exhibit had been a fundraiser for one of London’s largest hospitals and Reed had made a generous donation. Along with notes about the exhibit were a few other tidbits of Mayfair gossip.

The list was exactly what Caroline needed.

“Let’s leave your sister alone so she can dress.” Goldie steered Reed toward the door, sending Caroline a wink from over her shoulder. “I’ll be shopping this morning on Bond Street, but come to Rutherford Place this afternoon if you need more information.”

“Thank you!” Caroline, realizing she wore nothing but her chemise from the day before, belatedly clutched the sheet to her chest. But it didn’t really matter. Not with Goldie and Reed.

Once the door closed behind her unexpected early morning visitors, Caroline threw the drapes open wide and sat down to read the list more carefully. She’d heard some of the gossip herself, but a good portion of it was new. Still, before she wrote any of it for the Gazette, she was determined to find some evidence to lend the stories more substance.

The door opened again, but this time it was Eloisa who entered. The maid set the tray of tea she carried on the bureau and asked, “Shall I have a bath prepared?”

So much sunlight filtered inside that Caroline had no doubt she’d slept past noon. She had work to do but... a bath was not a horrible idea.

“Yes, please,” she answered. More and more, she was coming to appreciate the benefits of having a lady’s maid. “If it’s not too much trouble.

I think I'd like to wear my indigo day dress." It was prettier than the gowns she'd worn to work thus far but she wanted to look pretty—something she'd never really cared about before.

"That won't be any trouble, my lady."

The maid disappeared, leaving Caroline alone with her thoughts—finally. And a smile danced on her mouth. Because she wasn't thinking about articles, or galleys, or protecting her brother. No, she was thinking about Maxwell Black.

And she was infatuated.

WORTH WAITING FOR



Max had dropped her off at her mother's house around five in the morning. Right after that, he'd gone home, changed, saddled his horse, and then met his associates at Rotten Row. And for the first time in a very long time, he wasn't badgered about errors in the Gazette.

Following that, and then a few hours of sleep, Max returned to the newspaper offices.

And that was when his day took a turn for the worse.

With the offending note tucked safely into the pocket inside his jacket, he hailed a hackney and gave the directions to Caroline's mother's townhouse.

He couldn't risk waiting until she came into the offices. It would be too risky.

So when the driver pulled to a halt, Max wasted no time, tossing the driver a few coins and jumping down to the pavement. Just before he went to knock, however, the door opened.

"Standish," he said.

"Helton," the other man answered.

Max was tempted to show the note to her brother, her legal protector, but refrained from doing so. He didn't exactly blame Caroline's older brother for

his animosity, but he didn't trust the man, either. And Caroline had come to help him. She'd made herself an integral part of his staff, and more.

She deserved to see it first.

Lady Standish appeared behind her husband, smiling as the door closed. When she caught sight of Max, the petite blonde froze, but recovered immediately. "Good afternoon, my lord," she said as she dropped into a shallow curtsy.

Was it afternoon? Max made an equally perfunctory bow and then glanced at his fob watch.

"Business this side of town?" Standish showed none of the manners of his wife.

"Perhaps." Max's answer was curt, but then he reminded himself that Standish was, in addition to being a murder suspect, also Caroline's older brother.

Max, who'd grown up with no siblings of his own, nonetheless acknowledged the other's man's right to question Max's appearance on his mother and sister's doorstep.

"Business and pleasure," he provided. "Your mother and sisters are delightful ladies."

The Earl of Standish looked as though he had half a mind to return inside, but his wife, who had her fingers threaded through her husband's, tugged the earl toward the carriage stopped in the street. Max might have noticed it earlier if he hadn't been in such a hurry.

"My appointment with Madam Chantal is in twenty minutes. I mustn't be late, dear." She pouted prettily.

Glancing between his wife and Max, Standish looked torn for all of five seconds, but then, after sending Max a stern look of warning, relented with a nod. “You and I will talk later, then.”

Max had assumed as much. In light of what had occurred in his office at dawn, any decent gentleman would have gone straight to Caroline’s brother this morning.

But not Max.

Not yet, anyhow.

He needed to see Caroline first.

Caroline.

How was it possible that merely thinking her name made the sky seem a little bluer—almost the exact color of her eyes.

Watching Standish’s carriage drive away, Max adjusted his spectacles and brushed his hands down the lapels of his jacket. Before he could lift the knocker, however, the door opened. Only this time, it was the butler.

“Maxwell Black to see Lady Caroline.” But then, since this was the second morning he’d visited that week, added, “Good to see you, Mr. Long.”

“Should the lady of the house expect these early visits regularly now, my lord?”

“Possibly.” At this point, Max couldn’t rule it out. “Is Lady Caroline in?” He hadn’t considered the possibility that she’d be out until that moment, but it was possible, considering her dedication to writing her articles.

“Possibly.” The butler turned Max’s answer back on himself. “You may wait in the drawing room while I ask.”

At least Max wasn’t going to be made to wait on the street.

Left alone, while pacing across the floor, Max vaguely noticed details in the room that he'd not seen when he'd waited here before: rich but well-worn tapestries, finely crafted furniture, and a few paintings hanging on the walls that may or may not have been originals. Sounds of movement could be heard above, and he hoped some of those were made by Caroline.

So he waited. And then waited some more.

Just when his patience was nearing its end, the footsteps sounded louder. Max turned, Caroline's name on his lips, but he was to be disappointed.

Not Caroline, but her mother.

"Mr. Black." Mrs. Rutherford crossed the room and offered her hand. "What a delightful surprise it is to see you *again*."

"Madam." Max bowed, frustrated. "My apologies for showing up like this, but I have an urgent... an important matter to discuss with her. Is she in?"

"By her, I take it you mean Lady Caroline?"

The woman, an older, slightly plumper version of her daughter, would have looked too young to be the mother of grown children if not for the sorrow around her eyes and mouth.

Unpredictably, an ache throbbed in the area of his heart. *I forgot what this felt like.*

Caroline had mostly hidden the pain of her family's tragedy. Her mother was less successful.

"My lord?"

"Yes." He rolled his shoulders.

"Caroline is here. But she is currently indisposed. If you'd like to come

back later—”

“I’ll wait,” he interrupted. He couldn’t do anything, really, until he’d spoken with her. Max locked his stare on the older woman. “It is very important.”

Understandably confused, she nodded. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

“No, madam. Newspaper business.”

The lady of the house sat for what felt like an entire minute, taking his measure, but then she nodded. “Very well.” She walked to a corner and tugged on a bellpull. When the butler appeared almost immediately, she conveyed the situation.

“I will inform Miss Eloisa,” Mr. Long said.

“Miss Eloisa?” Max asked.

“Her maid, my lord.”

Mrs. Rutherford took a seat in a high-backed chair. “You might as well sit down. It could be longer than an hour.”

“I understand.” He’d told the woman it was urgent, hadn’t he? He resisted the urge to continue pacing and sat on the loveseat adjacent to his hostess.

“I’ve met your mother, my lord. Delightful lady. I might have met your father a time or two as well.”

“He passed just over ten years ago.” His father was not one of his favorite topics of conversation.

“I remember. He traveled a good deal when he was younger, didn’t he?”

“That is my understanding, madam.” When she continued staring at him, he added, “Even when he wasn’t abroad, he was rarely at home.” That was all

he would say on the matter.

“Some men never settle down.” Was she speaking from experience?

“Not all of us do,” he said.

“But you have.” She spoke confidently, her expression calm.

He hadn’t really.

“You don’t believe me?” she asked. Max interpreted the question as rhetorical. “You’ve been living in London for how long now?”

“Nine years.”

“You’ve lived in the same house, in the same city, for nearly a decade, and now you own a promising business. That is the very definition of the life of a settled gentleman.”

“Except for one thing,” Max said, shifting in his seat at this turn of conversation.

“You will marry.” A secret smile danced on her lips. “And I believe you’ll make an excellent husband and father. You don’t seem the type to accept anything less from yourself.”

“Perhaps. When did you meet my mother?” He’d steer this conversation away from the topic of matrimony. It didn’t matter how good of a husband or father he could be, he refused to saddle anyone else with his lie.

“She was one of my first visitors when we came to town. She is a special lady.” Mrs. Rutherford spoke a little more of their friendship, and then, after peppering him with questions about the estate he’d left his manager to handle, his schooling, and his plans for the newspaper, Max sent up a silent prayer of gratitude when the door finally opened. Not that she was being bothersome, but he needed—

His thoughts jarred to a stop.

Good lord, Caroline was stunning.

Her gown, a rich indigo color, matched her eyes almost perfectly and her hair was braided and pinned more elaborately than usual.

Last night he had tangled his hands in those silken tresses. He had watched her eyes flutter while she experienced *the little death*.

He rose, as did her mother, and Caroline pressed her hands against her abdomen, her cheeks pink as though she'd hurried to meet with him.

Max very nearly stepped forward to slide his hands around that waist but caught himself in time.

She licked her lips and then glanced away.

Any rational person would not have hired someone like her—beautiful, vulnerable, but with far too much courage for her own good—but Max didn't consider himself completely rational. He wouldn't have purchased the Gazette if he was.

And sometime over the past week, where she was concerned, he'd lost any remaining rationality.

The men of the *ton* were fools to have been dissuaded by her less-than-perfect debut. Because of one misstep, they considered her graceless. Until recently, they'd written her off. They'd ignored her—something he'd found impossible since that fateful day in the park.

He was aware of her... simply being, anytime she entered his vicinity. When she was absent, little things constantly reminded him of her. The sway of a woman's hips. A rose about to bloom. A notebook. A pencil.

The Gazette.

She reached out a gloved hand and Max didn't hesitate to take it, and then she curtsied, for her mother's benefit, no doubt.

"My apologies for keeping you waiting, my lord."

He hated being called that. And yet, she could call him whatever she pleased.

"It is I who should apologize." But his stare shifted to where her mother stood. Was he going to be forced to have this conversation with the older woman present? *Impossible.*

"Mother. If you wouldn't mind excusing Lord Helton and myself for just a moment. We've business to discuss." Caroline, apparently having sensed the need for privacy, made the request as politely as one could do while asking someone to go away.

Or perhaps she simply wanted to be alone with him—a promising thought.

When the door closed behind Mrs. Rutherford, who'd sent them both warning looks before relenting, Caroline tugged him to sit on the settee beside her.

"The paper is perfect today. So, why are you here?" she asked.

Max answered with his own question. "Why are you so beautiful?"

TROUBLE



Why was she so beautiful?

If Caroline had been breathless before, she was even more so after his startling question.

She swallowed hard. She did not know how to do this. Because she liked him. She liked him very much. What had initially been more of a crush was turning into something deeper—for her, anyhow. His feelings remained a mystery to her.

Even if he had just called her beautiful. Or had that been more of an accusation?

And then she realized. It was because she'd dressed—for him. But that wasn't something she could admit. He might think she was angling for an offer. And she wasn't. Really.

She wasn't. Even if that had been her first thought when she'd heard he was here—waiting to speak with her.

So she dropped her gaze and grimaced at her gown. “Because of this old thing?” Her very favorite gown. “I need to go to a... a garden party before I go into the offices.”

He blinked back at her. And then seemed to remember his purpose. “Of

course.” He looked toward the door, which had been left cracked open, and then reached into his jacket.

It was a different jacket than he’d worn the night before. And although shadows were etched beneath his eyes, his face was freshly shaven and his scent clean and spicy.

“When I arrived at the office earlier, I discovered this.” He handed her a folded note, his emerald gaze somber. “I came right here. Seeing as the threat involves you, you need to be aware...”

“*Leave the errors or else.*” Knowing full well her mother was near, Caroline kept her voice low. “*If you do not comply, I shall expose your secret and hers.*” She jerked her head up. “What secret? What’s he talking about?”

“I imagine your story about Dankworth? Only...” He winced. “It’s possible that whoever wrote this was still in the office after the press shut down.”

After the press shut down.

While he’d... While she’d... Because his office had interior windows. Anyone who was there could have looked inside.

Her blush crept up her neck, hotter than usual, and suddenly her skin felt too tight.

“But he can’t. No one can know!” Caroline struggled to organize her thoughts, let alone offer up a possible solution.

Max’s hand landed on hers. “I’ll catch whoever it is. Tonight, if possible. But until then, we need to be careful. *You* need to be careful.”

His hand was warm and reassuring, but it also had her wanting to turn and climb onto his lap—to find the ultimate protection with him.

And protect him, too.

If Reed discovered what the two of them had done, he'd call Maxwell out. That could very well result in one or both of them turning up dead, and she wasn't about to lose another person she lov—cared about. “How will we catch him?”

“We won't be catching anyone. I, on the other hand, have a plan. Tonight, while the workers take their backstreet break, I'll be guarding the finished frames.”

“No one can know.” It was exciting. But also, dangerous.

“Exactly.”

Caroline nodded. “The empty supply closet will make an excellent vantage point for us.”

“For me.” Max corrected her.

“Then where will I be?”

“At home—or a ball. Anywhere but the Gazette's offices.”

“But—”

He set a fingertip on her lips, silencing her in what should not have been an arousing gesture, but somehow was anyway. She stared at his mouth and had to squeeze her thighs together.

“Caroline.” He stared at her, deadly serious. “I don't want you anywhere near the paper tonight. Do you understand?”

“But you can't take him on by yourself! What if he's armed?” Images of Max wounded, or worse, weren't something she appreciated.

“I'll be fine.” Max dipped his chin.

She licked her lips, tasting the salt on his silencing fingertip. Her heart

skipped a beat—possibly two. She caught it between her teeth, trapping him.

“Caroline.” Almost a growl.

She abruptly released him, the note catching her eye.

Yours and her secrets. What secret was Max keeping?

“Why can’t you marry?” She hadn’t meant to ask the question, but he had told her he could *not* make an offer—not that he didn’t want to. “Does it have something to do with your secret?”

A moment before, she’d almost thought he would kiss her again. At her question, however, he’d pulled his hands away and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“No.” His gaze flicked to the window but then back. “Perhaps. But it doesn’t matter.”

“Tell me.” And then she clarified. “Not because I expect an offer. I’m not sure I even wish to marry. But I should know—”

“You knowing isn’t necessary.” He stood, leaving her to tilt her head back in order to read his expression—which was difficult, seeing as he’d put up some sort of wall. Was it because she’d asked about marriage, or because of his secret?

“You don’t want to know,” he said. “Trust me.”

“I do. I thought you trusted me, too.”

“I do. It’s just...” He turned away, running one hand through his hair. “It isn’t my secret to tell.” He looked pained, and Caroline abstained from pressing him.

“Is that why you came, then? Just to tell me to stay away?”

“I also need to know the names of the men who were outside last night—

so I can eliminate them as suspects.”

Reaching into her sleeve, she removed the note she'd made while Eloisa fussed with her hair. “These are the men who *weren't* there: Mr. Wallace,” she read. “Mr. Jones. Link, both reporters, and three composers.” Caroline surrendered her list.

He didn't have to do this alone!

But then suddenly he was dropping to his knees, cradling her hand in his. For a confused moment, she thought he intended to propose.

And her heart leapt.

“It's not that I don't want you there,” he said. He lifted her hand and held it to his mouth. “But in case you haven't noticed, I'm easily distracted by you.”

“I don't do it intentionally...”

“It's not your fault—not at all. I'm the one to blame.” His voice dropped. “Even now, with your mother most likely listening at the door, I'm tempted to...” He dropped his gaze and swallowed hard.

“And that's a bad thing.” It wasn't really a question.

“Yes. No.” He shook his head. “A little. The thing is, I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you. I... care about you.”

“Oh.” Caroline wanted to hear more but couldn't bring herself to ask. “Nothing is going to happen to me.”

“Because you will be here, in your mother's home. Or at a ball. Anywhere but in that office.”

But she'd been involved in this from the beginning. And *he knew that*. “I'll leave after I've turned my stories in,” she insisted.

He pinched his mouth together, shook his head, and then rolled his eyes. “I can’t keep you away, can I?”

“Not really. No,” Caroline said, frustrated with yet another male who considered himself impervious to danger. Did he not know he needed protecting too?

Maxwell glanced around the room and leaned forward.

This kiss seemed almost desperate. Hard and quick, like he was saying goodbye.

For a flash, she imagined herself begging him not to go, fearful of letting him walk away.

She couldn’t allow him to come into her life, make her feel irresistible, and then fight villains off without her—possibly getting injured. Or worse.

The kiss ended but neither moved.

“Please, promise me you’ll be careful.”

“Of course,” he answered.

And with that, he was gone.

Her mother’s sudden appearance the instant the front door closed came as no surprise. “What was that all about?”

“Didn’t you hear?” Caroline asked, one eyebrow raised.

“No.” Her mother frowned. “Josephine lost a ruby pendant and desperately needed my help finding it. I swear, if that girl’s feet weren’t both attached, she’d lose one of them.”

Caroline smiled weakly. “It’s only paste,” she said.

“Yes, well...” Her mother shrugged. “Now, tell me. What was so important that he’d cool his heels for over an hour?”

Caroline provided her mother with a *very* condensed version of the threat, only hinting that Reed would be upset if he learned how much time she'd spent alone with Max—a man who'd denied courting her more than once.

“What really bothers me—” Caroline frowned. “—Is that he won't tell me his secret.”

Her mother's brows shot up. “Why would he tell you his secret?”

“Because he knows mine.” Caroline would stomp her foot if it wouldn't make her seem childish. “He said he trusted me.”

“Are you in love with him?”

What? “I barely know him.” And yet, she felt like she knew him better than anyone else. She had fun with him. She felt alive with him. In fact, she could hardly wait to be alone with him again.

She *liked* him. Very much.

“Do you love him?” her mother pressed.

“Absolutely not.”

But her mother lowered her chin, waiting for the truth.

“I don't think so.” Caroline bit her lip. “Besides, he says he can't offer for anyone right now. And I think it's because of his secret.”

“Regardless, he waited forty-seven minutes to see you—after waiting half an hour for me. He must have feelings for you.”

“I'm an employee. He thinks he's responsible for me.”

“Perhaps. But a busy gentleman like Lord Helton does not spend half the afternoon waiting for his other employees to finish bathing.” Her mother tilted her head thoughtfully. “And I'm not at all certain, but I have an idea what his secret might be.”

“You think he cares... wait? What do you think it is?”

Her mother rose, retrieved one of the genealogy books everyone kept telling her to memorize, and joined her on the settee. Caroline tapped her toe and shifted in her seat while her mother flipped through the pages.

“Here.” She’d opened up to the ‘H’s. “Hector Black, the former Earl of Helton, *your* Mr. Black’s father, traveled a good deal. See here. When he was six and ten, he toured all of England. A few years later he left on a long ocean journey—to sail the world, but also, it says here, to visit plantations his father established in the tropics. The plantation manager reported that he never arrived, and five years later he was legally declared deceased.”

Perhaps these books did contain valuable information. Caroline leaned forward. “It says the declaration was voided a year later.”

“Because Lord Helton returned, from the dead, presumably. Or at least, the man who came forward claimed to be Lord Helton.”

Caroline contemplated the ramifications of what she was reading—of what her mother was implying.

“You don’t think it was the same man.”

“It’s possible. But people say he was different. Colder. More distant. Of course, no one knows what he endured and traumatic events change people. *Time* changes people. Nonetheless, having been betrothed to Mr. Black’s mother from the time she was born, the earl had no choice but to honor the betrothal.”

“She went ahead and married him, then. Do you remember hearing about any of this?”

“I remember hearing he returned. For a few weeks, everyone was talking about it. But then a new scandal came along. People forget. You know how

the *ton* is. Anyway, a few years later, he was a guest at one of your uncle's house parties. He spent most of his time in the hunting lodge. From what I remember, they gambled extensively then." Caroline's eyes locked with her mother. Because that lodge was now nothing more than charred remains. But that did not signify.

"No one challenged his identity?"

"Not after the marriage. People assumed that if Lady Helton, who was the daughter of a marquess, was willing to marry him, he must be the same person who left. It was well known that she'd been raised to marry nobility. Most daughters of titled men are."

Caroline considered those words carefully, her mother having proven more than once to see things others missed.

Two years before, her mother had expressed suspicions that her husband and oldest son were in trouble. She'd warned Reed, Randall, and Father that the former Earl of Standish and his son were making poor decisions—because of the opium. She'd begged them to keep their distance.

Everyone except Reed had ignored her, and in the end, events had proven her right.

"If the man who returned was not the Earl of Helton, that would mean Maxwell isn't either."

"Not exactly," her mother said. "Unless someone comes forward to challenge the former earl's claim, Maxwell Black remains the legitimate earl."

"With the former earl dead... The only person who would know the truth is Lady Helton—his mother."

"Yes. And I doubt she'd ever dispute it. She'd lose more than the

dowager estate, she'd lose her standing.”

Caroline was nodding. Maxwell had said the secret was not his to tell. The man she knew would take his mother's wishes to heart. And if Caroline's mother was correct, he'd never do anything that would threaten Lady Helton's position in society.

“I think,” her mother said, “Maxwell Black would reveal this secret if it was up to him. But he won't marry as long as he thinks he's an imposter.”

“Why not?”

“Because he'd be making his wife an imposter too.”

SAVING THE DAY



Caroline wanted to be angry with Maxwell. She was the one who had convinced him he had a problem. She was the one who had narrowed down the window of time during which the sabotage must be taking place. He really ought to consider her capable of helping him catch their troublemaker.

At the same time, she conceded that she knew nothing about capturing criminals and had never willingly harmed another human being—not even Josephine when she was being her most annoying.

And more important than any of that, the London Gazette was Maxwell's newspaper. He was the boss, the publisher. He had every right to tell her not to come in.

But she did anyway, of course. Having gathered just enough evidence to support her stories, she wrote her articles and left for the Gazette offices late in the afternoon. She did not walk on this occasion, but relied on her household's coach and driver to deliver her. She had promised Maxwell that she'd be careful, after all.

Her plan was to deliver her stories to Mr. Wallace, check in with Max, and have Coachman Nicholas take her back home after. But inside, she arrived to what could only be described as chaos.

The two reporters, both of whom hadn't shown any interest in associating with her, were working frantically at one of the tables. And Mr. Jones was in Mr. Wallace's usual spot, holding an article up to his face to read.

At the sound of the door closing behind her, Maxwell peered out of his office.

"Wallace's mother died," he explained and then ran a hand through his hair. "And Matilda locked up earlier. I've got her running again, but we're behind on edits." The top buttons of his collar were undone, his shirtsleeves rolled up, and he'd removed his waistcoat. Black smudges of ink stained his white shirt.

"Give me one moment." She slipped back out the door, her decision made. Maxwell joined her on the pavement a moment later, just in time to watch Coachman Nicholas driving away.

"You didn't have to do that." He sounded grateful and sorry at the same time.

Caroline touched his arm and, feeling his tension, she squeezed. *This man...!* "I'd go mad, you know, sitting at home knowing you could use help." He winced over at her, then combed a hand through his hair again.

Nothing about him resembled an aristocrat. No arrogance and none of the entitlement she'd grown accustomed to from her uncle and cousin. Maxwell was simply a man doing all he could to fulfill his responsibilities.

And in Caroline's eyes, that made him even more handsome—if that was possible.

"I'll be careful." She covered her heart with one hand. "I promise."

Max's arm moved as if to encircle her waist, but he hesitated, his actions tempered by the appearance of a passing carriage. Leaning closer, he

breathed a soft plea. "Do not wander alone."

"Not even with you?" She couldn't resist a teasing smile.

He emitted a low, masculine growl. "Only with me."

Caroline's heart fluttered, but, unfortunately, over the next several hours, neither had a chance to test his promise. Since Caroline was the only writer who'd worked with Mr. Wallace, she ended up doing most of the editor's job—reading, editing, and proofing, but also determining which stories would be cut.

Which she was perfectly comfortable with. Until she came across a story written for the Scotland Yard section—about her brother.

This was her opportunity to accomplish the task which had led her to apply in the first place.

New Evidence in Standish Fire.

She read through the article. There was no new evidence, really. Only a few old accounts brought up—one by a local villager, a merchant, who'd held a grudge against Reed for calling him out for price gouging. Another by an old acquaintance of her cousin.

The article had been put together with old information, and even that was all hearsay. But would Mr. Wallace have cut it?

This was her chance. Reed was innocent. This story would only cause people to question that all over again.

And killing it would be as easy as tossing it into the trash.

"What's that?"

So many times, her senses had picked up on the presence of Maxwell Black without having to see him. But of course they would fail to alert her

now.

She turned in her chair, wincing as she met his stare. “It’s about Reed...”

His jaw tightened. “What were you going to do with it?”

He was right to ask that question. “I don’t know.” She couldn’t lie to him. “It’s not very good. I would want to leave it out even if it was. I just...” She didn’t want to betray Maxwell. Doing so would mean she was no better than the saboteur.

“You just...?” he prompted.

“I need to protect Reed,” she admitted.

“Did you think I didn’t know your real reason for coming here?” A little light seemed to leave his eyes.

“I didn’t throw it out, though, because I couldn’t—I can’t...” Caroline skimmed the article. “But I don’t think we should run it. Yes, it might remind everyone of the fire, but besides that, it’s... tired. Nothing Mr. Pip wrote in here is new.”

With a steady gaze, Max reached out one hand. “Give it to me.”

She handed it over without any protest, though she still felt the need to explain. “I wouldn’t... I—”

Max tore the story in half, and then tore what was left in half two more times.

He stepped around the table and, holding his arm out, opened his hand. Small pieces of paper fluttered downward, into a wastebin below.

“I trust your judgement. If you say it’s old news, it’s old news.”

“You didn’t have to—”

“I said, I trust your judgement.” His stare burned, making her warm at

first, and then hot, reminding her of their *celebration* the night before. A celebration she wouldn't mind repeating. But this was work.

This was business. Or was it?

"Why?" She needed to know.

"It's old news. But also, it would hurt you. It's not worth it."

His words ought to be enough, so why was she disappointed? Her mother's words replayed in her head. "*Do you love him?*"

Did she? "Thank you," she said.

Was that part of what had kept her from hiding the article from him and then tossing it out?

"Did you see this one about the missing frigate? It was carrying nearly a million pounds of tea. I was thinking to put it on the front page."

Max nodded. "Definitely."

Caroline didn't see Max again until after the first galley was made, and even then, they couldn't really talk. Those who'd stayed to proof worked silently.

Occasionally, she'd feel Maxwell watching her from behind the page he was reading. She did her best to ignore it—ignore him. Not because she wanted to, but because seeing the spark in his eyes sent bolts of heat racing through her veins. He'd admitted that she distracted him and now she understood.

She stopped reading and fanned her hand in front of her face.

Because, good heavens! When he stared at her like that, she could hardly remember her own name, let alone pay attention to what she was reading.

"Looks good." Maxwell pushed his chair out. "Just those two errors."

Again, just like every other time they'd proofed initial galleys, mistakes were far and few between. The compositors quickly made the corrections and a second galley was made.

Caroline knew it would be perfect, but they scoured it for mistakes a second time.

"Let's put out a paper, gentlemen," Max declared before shooting his gaze towards her. "And lady."

Caroline rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "Too late," she joked as the compositors and pressmen drifted toward the back of the building. Max extinguished one of the gas lanterns on the proofing side of the room and then jerked his head toward the closet.

Caroline nodded. He'd told her not to go anywhere alone.

Except with him.

Moving silently, she slipped inside the empty storage room.

A minute later, Max joined her.

DON'T STOP



“Shouldn’t you leave it cracked?” Caroline whispered when Maxwell pulled the door closed behind him.

“I cut a hole here.” It was the first thing he’d done after leaving Caroline’s home earlier that day. Which had been a good decision, because he wouldn’t have had time later, what with Wallace absent.

The abandoned closet normally would have smelled like the rest of the Gazette’s office—a combination of ink and paper and oil. Instead, Caroline’s scent filled his senses.

Hints of some citrus and flowers he couldn’t recognize, but familiar, and sexy as hell.

“Where is it?”

“Right here.” Taking her hand, Max guided her fingertips to the small opening. Through it, he had a direct line of sight to the frames.

Max rubbed his hands together. They would finally catch whoever’d been tormenting him all this time.

"It's perfect," she whispered in the enveloping darkness.

He had no need for light; he could feel her presence.

She peered through the opening, emanating warmth along his side. In the

obscurity, the rustle of her gown evoked the memory of the night before. He flexed his hand and inhaled deeply, wanting to breathe in more of her. All of her if that was possible.

It would have been better if she'd stayed home—for her own safety. But she'd stepped up when the paper needed her.

When *he'd* needed her.

So, with the building half-empty, at this time of night, he would damn well keep her in his sights until she was safe at home.

“We can take turns watching.” Max leaned over her, positioning his eye so he could keep watch. In such crowded quarters, it only made sense to reach around her back and rest his palm on her rounded hip. Both of them stayed quiet for the next few minutes, until Caroline broke the silence.

“Thank you for earlier,” she whispered.

Doing his best to focus on the stillness of the work room, Max almost didn't hear her. He swallowed. “You don't need to thank me.” He'd skimmed the article earlier, knowing she'd want to cut anything written about her brother.

And his heart had dropped into his shoes when he'd caught her contemplating it.

It hadn't been a test, he'd simply kept it with the other articles in the event that they lacked material. But, whether it was intended or not, he'd learned the strength of her character.

It had been a weak story. He'd half-expected her to hide it from him. He wasn't sure he'd blame her if she had.

“I didn't even want to read it. I wanted it to disappear.” Her stark honesty

nearly broke his heart.

“He’s your brother.”

“I know. But you are my... I never want to betray your trust.”

“You won’t.” Emotion thickened his throat. He didn’t deserve her loyalty. But he wanted it. He wanted... *her*.

Suddenly insatiable, he recalled her taste, and his cock stirred. *Not the place or time, Black*. But he inhaled just then and her sweet essence had him pulling her closer.

Was that her heart beating, or his?

“I missed you today,” she whispered.

“But I was here.” Max smiled in the dark.

“I know. But not *here* here.”

“I know.” His front to her back, Max splayed one hand over her ribcage, smoothing his other hand along her side. “I missed you too.”

She leaned into him.

If they continued thusly, Max was not going to survive this.

“Here, let me watch.”

Max straightened so she could view the workroom. With each second that passed, his awareness of her increased. Each breath. Every little movement.

“What is your secret, Maxwell?”

“I don’t have any secrets,” he returned, not at all willing to share it.

“But the note...”

“What are yours?”

“You know all of mine.”

“I might not.”

“I think you do.” They spoke to one another in low whispers, bantering, flirting, dangerously playing with the sparks of attraction they’d failed to resist.

Playing with fire.

Max’s hands crept up, cursing the short stays she wore, and then cradled her breasts over her gown. Perfect. Everything about her was perfect.

Holding her snug, his cock strained between them.

“There’s one of them. Can you feel it?” It was a very improper question, one he’d blame on the intimacy of their situation.

“I—” The minx wiggled her bum. “Yes.”

On the opposite side of the door, the room remained empty.

Max stroked his thumb over the fabric of her bodice, finding both of her nipples taut, aroused. Were they a dusty pink color? Or perhaps a darker rose?

This wasn’t a good idea. He should have sent her home in a hackney hours ago. But he’d been selfish, professionally and personally.

“I’ll tell my secrets if you tell me yours.” She covered his hands with hers, encouraging his touch.

“I thought I knew all your secrets.”

But she shook her head. “Not all of them...”

Max blinked, his eye peering through the small chasm into what remained an empty room.

Caroline’s hands gripped his wrists now and he wasn’t sure if she did it for balance or to keep him from stopping.

He *desperately* hoped the latter, and desperation wasn't a feeling he was used to.

"You like that?" he asked.

"Yessss."

Holding her like this, Max would learn all her secrets.

Only... this woman didn't really keep secrets. She was precisely who she showed the world. She was, in fact, the same woman who'd chased down her dog in the park. Open and honest. Intelligent and determined.

Opinionated.

Exasperating.

Stubborn.

Max nudged her bodice using his chin and then nipped her shoulder.

She squeezed his wrists tighter.

"Oh, I like that." Her voice came out a little garbled-sounding. "I like almost everything you do."

"Not everything?"

"I don't like when you're grumpy."

Max chuckled under his breath. He didn't like himself when he was grumpy, either. "What else?"

"I like calling you my lord, but that annoys you."

"You can call me whatever you want."

He pinched the tight buds, not hard, but enough to make her squirm. What would they feel like in his mouth? His heart raced.

He couldn't tear her bodice like he wanted. Any moment he might have

to catch a criminal.

And eventually, she'd have to return to her mother's house.

So instead he fisted the material of her skirts, gathering, gathering... until he could feel her stockings.

"Are they blue?" He very nearly groaned.

"Yes," she didn't hesitate to tell him. No, this amazing woman shifted, widening her stance.

His hand caressed the sensual garment, over the little ridge they made, around the curve of her thigh.

"Silk." Max breathed the word.

"It makes the best stockings."

"Not the fabric, your skin." He traced his fingertips along the top of the material, rationalizing away all the reasons they shouldn't be doing this. He brushed his hand over her center, finding it wet with her arousal.

"I like... that." Her voice sounded in the darkness.

"I know."

Her breath hitched.

"So wet." Max licked his lips. "You liked my mouth on you?"

"Yes. Better than anything else."

His chest expanded at her words. As did other regions of his anatomy.

"God, Caroline." He couldn't moan. He couldn't growl. He could only say her name. And thank the deity who'd created her.

She had both hands pressed against the door, allowing him to trap her there with his body.

“Maxwell.”

“No.” Would she understand?

Her silence was nearly deafening. But then she said... “*My lord.*”

Only her. She was the only one. Max rewarded her by slowly circling his thumb along her crease. Over her opening. Around her clit.

She twisted around and Max captured her mouth with his. Today, she tasted like... saffron. “What is that?” Max nipped at her bottom lip.

“Mr. Crenshaw is generous with his gin.”

“That’s not very proper of you,” he teased.

“It isn’t, is it?”

Her head fell back. Max trailed his lips around her chin, allowing loose strands of hair to snag in his whiskers.

More silk, luxurious, decadent. He wanted to surround her. He wanted her surrounding him.

But then they both froze.

Max watched as Fergus lit the gaslight near Matilda. But he wasn’t there to do damage, and he wasn’t alone. Crenshaw had returned as well and was locking on the screens.

Their villain had not made his appearance.

“It’s not him,” he said, disappointed. “They’re setting up the run.”

Caroline let out a trembling little breath.

“It’s not Wallace. I know it’s not Wallace.” She guessed the person he’d worried over all day. Wallace never took time off. He’d been dedicated to the Gazette for most of his life. But the timing of his absence was suspicious.

“How do you know that?”

“He loves the Gazette too much.” And then she added, “He respects you too much.”

Max wanted to believe it.

Outside, he heard the clanking of metal while his pressmen went to work. The paper would be clean. At least he knew that.

“I suppose we should go out there.” But he kept his hands on her, not ready to let go.

“We can’t! If anyone sees us come out together...”

“Ah...” Max got her meaning and was not disappointed. She provided them with a great excuse but also a tempting opportunity. Where was his work ethic now?

Max spun her around, and... they broke. He couldn’t tell who broke first, but it could best be likened to that rare phenomenon of lightning flashing and thunder cracking simultaneously.

She fumbled at the fasteners of his trousers while he plundered her mouth. This kiss was long and deep and almost frantic.

He kept one hand between her legs, still holding her skirt up. She was wet, soft, willing.

“I wish I could see you,” Max admitted. Instead, however, he’d settle for knowing how every inch of her felt. He’d settle for hearing her gasps of pleasure. He’d settle for tasting... all of her.

This time.

Meanwhile, she’d unfastened the buttons holding his trousers up, but she’d also shoved them halfway down his legs, moving them closer to the

point of no return.

Walking them backwards, Max steered them away from the door. They bumped into an unused worktable, but it didn't matter.

The moving pieces of the printer outside provided the perfect cloak to hide their breathy moans and whispered requests.

She succeeded at tugging his shirt up and then, good God. Warm palms gripped his length. "Is this all right?" She gave a tender squeeze.

Dear lord in heaven, she was so much better than just *all right*.

"*Caroline.*" Max adjusted his stance to reach her better, and then lifted one of her legs, hooking it around his waist.

One hand around his neck, she helped line him up at her entrance.

If only could think at all, he'd remember why they shouldn't do this. But he couldn't think. He could only feel.

"Yes."

This was madness.

He caught her other thigh, and in one motion, slid inside, lifting her off the ground. He seized her cry with his mouth, and then realized... "I hurt you."

"No." She had her arms locked around his neck now, her face buried in his throat. "Don't stop. Don't you dare."

Bracing her against the wall, Max lifted, sliding her up and then penetrating deeper. She locked her ankles at his back and after a slight adjustment, they began moving together.

Sex had never been like this. Not this good. This perfect.

This *right*.

With Caroline, Max could almost feel her soul take over his body, and his take over hers.

Her gasps grew louder, and he covered her mouth with his. He didn't want to silence her pleasure, he only wanted to capture it.

In the darkness, he could only imagine the swan-like length of her neck, the way her eyes flared when he caught her watching him, and the color of her hair, a myriad of browns with the occasional golden highlight.

All of which he'd memorized but would never tire of seeing.



NO ONE TOLD young women that relations could be like this. No one told young women anything—not anything that mattered, anyhow. If they did, Mayfair's debutantes would know to be far more discriminating in their choice of husband.

And they certainly wouldn't go to the altar without testing... this out.

Because Caroline had not felt anything like this when Lord Dankworth tried kissing her. Nor could she have ever imagined all these... feelings.

Both physical and emotional. It was the best she'd ever felt. She'd not contemplate it ending.

Instead, she clung to Max like a drowning woman, sliding her hands inside his shirt, smoothing her palms over sinewy muscles beneath his silky taut skin.

Allowing short hairs to thread between her fingers.

This. This must be the reason she'd been born—to be with this man—like this.

“You're better than my dreams.” He kept moving her, bracing her. “I

didn't know..."

She lifted herself up and lowered herself again, wanting all the fullness of his member, and taking it.

The promise felt the same as it had the night before, but different. They were joined at the mouth and... lower. With each stroke and thrust, the ache of need inside grew sharper. It was like walking up to a cliff and wondering what it would feel like to fly.

"Love." Did she imagine him whispering the word? His arms, which were hooked around her thighs, were shaking now. The muscles in her legs began to burn.

They kept moving. Together. Deeper. Sometimes matching the rhythm of the printer outside, sometimes not.

With the wall at her back, she took each stroke, some short and hard, some long and harder. A bead of sweat landed on her cheek and she didn't know if it was his or hers.

It didn't matter.

Because he was Max.

She licked his neck, and then sucked, claiming him for herself. He was hers.

"Caroline. Love. Yes." His chest vibrated with each word.

And then he was lifting her, so high she only felt his tip, and then lowering her again.

"You're close."

"Yes." And so was he. He felt even larger, harder.

He lifted her again. And then lowered her.

And again.

Empty, aching, wanting. Followed by fullness, completion, but also *wanting*.

“More.”

Which was precisely what he gave her.

Her heart stood still and elicit pleasure shot down her spine.

It wasn't only good, it was... spiritual.

And it left her thoroughly satisfied, boneless and exhausted.

She was barely aware of Maxwell adjusting their clothing and lowering them both to the floor. She simply snuggled against his side and closed her eyes.

“You shouldn't have to sleep on a floor, love.”

“Mfph... fine...” She didn't mind. Not if he was beside her.

“You deserve silk sheets and a down-filled mattress.” He rubbed circles on her back.

Caroline was halfway asleep when she felt his mouth on her forehead. Followed by a low and sorrowful-sounding groan.

“What am I going to do with you?”

PERFECT FOR HIM



Just when Max believed Caroline Rutherford could not be more adorable, she proved him wrong. And he couldn't keep himself from grinning like a fool at the soft snoring sound coming from her very kissable mouth.

She wasn't perfect. But she was perfect for him.

He didn't know when it had happened, but sometime between that day in the park and now, she'd damn near captured his heart.

And he didn't know what to do about it.

Careful not to wake her, Max rose and peered through the crack he'd looked through earlier.

Matilda would stop running any minute now.

The copies of today's paper had been folded and were stacked in bundles of twenty-five. The carriers would arrive just before dawn, when Mr. Jones, who would be returning soon, would ensure they were distributed correctly—for delivery throughout London, but also all of England. And recently he'd made arrangements to send them overseas. Because trade had only grown, and even the traitorous Americans occasionally appreciated reading their news.

With the pressmen still busy, and the room otherwise seemingly empty, Max silently slipped out of the closet and dashed around the tables so it would seem he'd just returned from his office.

Perfect timing too, as the pressmen stopped turning Matilda's large drum, slowing the steam engine's momentum. With a few clanks and some groaning, the two tons of metal making up the press crawled to a halt.

"Looks good." Max announced his presence.

Crenshaw stared at Max curiously, but then shook his head. "Some gents want to talk to you, boss. Summerhope... Wintersnap... fancy titled bloke. Other one didn't say his name. Looks like he's from the docks, though."

Winterhope and Beckworth. What the devil did they want?

Max pulled out his fob watch and had just enough light to make out the time. It was too late for rabble rousing and too early for Rotten Row.

"What did you tell them?" Had they looked for Max?

The man's gaze slid to the closet door and then back, but he had the good sense to refrain from making any comments. "I don't share your business, Mr. Black. Not unless you want me to."

Max exhaled and then scrubbed a hand down his face.

Ever since Caroline drifted off to sleep, a distinct possibility had lurked in the back of his mind. Crenshaw's response meant it was more of a probability.

A damn near certainty.

Max was going to have to marry her. Not that he resented it—not even a little. But he was going to have to tell her the truth. He wouldn't marry her without coming clean. He hoped she didn't end up resenting him.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he decided he'd deal with Winterhope first.
“Where are they now?”

“Waiting in your office. Unless they've given up and left.”

Wonderful.

“Right, then.” Max rubbed the back of his neck. “No problems with the run?”

“Not today, sir. I'll finish cleaning up and go home.”

Max winced, waiting. Because Caroline was asleep in the closet.

“Where'd you go off to? Not like you to abandon Matilda so early...”
The low voice sounding behind Max was none other than Leopold Beckworth—a self-made man, the only amongst their team who didn't hold a title—unless one counted his unofficial one, which was that of the *Bond Street Bounder*.

“We need a word,” Winterhope added, looking more serious than usual.

Winterhope and Beckworth were night and day, black and white. But both made for powerful cogs in the wheels of Malum's team.

And they would not have come to his office unless it was important. The fact that they were both here made his nerves jump.

“In here.” He resisted the urge to glance toward the closet before leading them through to his office. These men were too astute not to notice something like that.

Max would wake Caroline after he heard what these two had to say, settle her into his carriage. Steal a kiss or two.

Propose marriage.

The idea didn't sound as gloomy as he'd expect. Not when it involved a

certain chestnut-haired lady with eyes the color of a summer sky.

Beckworth and Winterhope stepped into the office but refrained from taking a seat.

Max struck a flint for some light and then closed the door behind him. “What is it?”

“The mistakes. The errors in the paper,” Beckworth said.

“What about them?” Had more slipped by that evening? Had he been too distracted by Caroline when he ought to have directed all his attention to his task?

Impossible.

Maybe a little possible.

“They aren’t errors. They’re code,” Winterhope added.

Max froze. Of course. Why bloody else would someone be so damned diligent in their sabotage? He went around his desk and withdrew the latest copies of mistake-ridden papers from the bottom drawer.

He moved the candle to the side and smoothed it open.

And there it was. How the devil had he missed something so obvious? How had any of them?

“It’s the first letter of each mistake. Backwards.”

“Fuck.” Max flipped to the previous edition. “This one is forwards.”

“They alternate.” Winterhope took a note from his jacket and laid it beside the paper. Lines of code, deciphered. “They signify locations. Times. And we think the last number is the price for each delivery.”

Tea. Gotten illegally, traded for opium.

Max did not appreciate being used. Especially when the efforts thwarted his own. He mentally ran through the employees Caroline had suspected.

“Who?” he asked.

“We don’t know yet.” Winterhope frowned. “I’m inclined to think it’s one of your composers.”

“I’ve considered this.” Max rubbed his chin. “Changing out letters, let alone words, takes a good eye and a steady hand.”

Footsteps sounded somewhere else in the building. Mr. Jones, no doubt, and the delivery boys.

However, the footsteps weren’t random. They grew louder and louder and then...

Max’s door flew open.

“Where the hell is my sister?”

BREAKING MATILDA



Max held up a hand to keep the Earl of Standish from pouncing. But that wasn't necessary. Because the earl wasn't alone. Lady Standish grasped his arm, holding him back, doing what she could, Max assumed, to keep the man out of trouble.

"What makes you think I've done anything with her?" Max would come clean, when he asked for her hand. But he wasn't about to discuss his private business openly.

"Because she wasn't at the ball tonight." Standish looked fit to be tied. "And when I delivered my mother home, Caroline's maid said she wasn't in her chamber—that she had come here—when I distinctly forbade her from working for you. What are you playing at, Black? None of this is proper—or safe."

Bloody hell. The earl had every right to be upset.

Standish's countess sent a wary glance in her husband's direction, but then addressed Max. "She is here, isn't she?"

"We were running late. I planned on escorting her to your mother's house when we finished up." And then he added. "She is... sleeping."

"Sleeping?" If anything, the earl sounded even more suspicious. "My

sister is sleeping *here*? If you've so much as touched her..." Standish stopped short of finishing his sentence, suddenly aware that they weren't alone.

Even if Max was well and truly backed into a corner.

Distribution activities were in full swing now. Doors slammed and men shouted from outside. And before Max could answer Standish's question, a shadow passed outside one of the interior windows.

"Why is Mr. Pip here?" Lady Standish's question pricked the tense silence.

Max, who'd hoped Winterhope and Beckworth might take their leave, was to be sorely disappointed.

"She is—" Max stopped. He frowned and then turned to the countess. "How do you know Mr. Pip?" Pip was a rough and tumble reporter. How did the daughter of a duke come to be acquainted with such a man?

A hint of light filtered through the windows, purples, lavender and orange, and the petite blonde woman turned wide open eyes toward him. "He works for my father."

Five, then ten seconds of stunned silence followed her answer.

Lady Standish's father was the Duke of Crossing—a man whose wealth had increased in a time where other titled men were struggling to maintain their estates.

A man known to have consorted with confirmed pirates and smugglers. A man who had vehemently defended England's right to override the Chinese law that made opium illegal.

The puzzle pieces fell into place. "It's him."

At first he felt the anger of betrayal, but then his thoughts turned more

rational. If the reporter had been sent by Crossing to put coded messages in the paper, and had then failed when his methods were discovered, he wouldn't be hanging around the Gazette's offices much longer.

He'd be frustrated. Perhaps vengeful.

The note.

And Caroline was asleep in the closet.

Max reached into another drawer, this time snatching his pistol, and then rushed through the door. The other men, Standish included, were right behind him.

"Stay here, Goldie," Caroline's brother's words barely registered as Max sprinted back to the work room.

And then, seeing nothing out of order, skidded to a halt.

"You're back early." Max kept calm as he addressed the man who had begged for his job just over a year ago. A man Max had given the benefit of the doubt.

Pip's dull grey eyes searched the room. For escape? He stood almost a foot shorter than Max and was scrawny for a grown man. Max wouldn't feel threatened in the least if he'd taken Caroline home earlier.

Winterhope strolled into the room and leisurely blocked the north exit. Beckworth moved to the south side and Max felt Standish right behind him.

"Is something the matter, boss?" Pip feigned innocence.

"I think you know." Max took a step forward, prepared to attack if necessary.

Pip's expression was one that almost had Max feeling sorry for the man.

Almost.

Because the reporter had been figuratively and literally forced into a corner.

“I didn’t mean anything by it.” Pip walked backward. “It was a prank. Nothing more.”

“Put your hands up.” Not many had the nerve to deny an order issued by Leopold Beckworth. Or the stupidity. Pip, unfortunately, had both.

In a flash, he waved a knife, his eyes wide. “Don’t make me use this. Let me walk away. Just leave it.”

“It’s too late for that.” Winterhope appeared unconcerned, elbow resting on a shelf behind him, his hand dangling, ankles crossed.

Beckworth took another step but then...

Suddenly Max’s worst nightmare played out when the closet door opened and Caroline stepped through it, smiling at him sleepily, rumped, looking thoroughly tugged. But then she blinked.

Under any other circumstances, it would have been adorable. But, God. Not now. Not like this—

Pip took full advantage. He locked an arm around her neck and pressed the sharp edge of the blade against tender skin.

Max’s. Heart. Stopped.

Because the man holding the knife had nothing to lose.

And Caroline had become Max’s everything.

“That isn’t necessary, Pip.” Every cell in Max’s body stood ready. He couldn’t show how much he cared. He couldn’t show any fear. “Let her go, mate. No need to scare a lady.”

Pip edged around the room, dragging Caroline with him while Max and

his associates mirrored the malicious man's steps. But the traitor had his eye on escape, and as he crossed in front of Matilda, he seemed intent on using Caroline as his shield.

She wasn't crying. And despite such a rude awakening, she moved carefully, guided by her captor, locking her stare on Max, and waiting...

Waiting for him to save her.

Because she *trusted* him.

"Let her go," Max repeated. He would do whatever it took to save her. He refused to entertain any other outcome.

"I don't think so. Like the fancy feller said. It's too late."

"But it isn't. Don't make matters worse for yourself. We can work something out." Max had managed to take three steps forward but was still too far away to make his move. "It was for the Duke of Crossing, eh? He's the one giving you the codes." Max got in two more steps. "But you've angered him. I'm right. There's no use denying it. But we can help you. We can protect you from him."

The trapped man's gaze shifted to the door and then back to Max. Pip shook his head. "There is nowhere safe for me."

"I'll buy your passage—to the continent—or the Americas if you prefer. You can start a new life." Caroline flinched and then a bead of blood appeared on her neck—a spot Max had kissed at least a dozen times.

Holding the pistol behind him, Max adjusted his grip, checking himself. Because he wasn't close enough. He didn't have a clear enough shot.

"I'm all right." Caroline made a sorry attempt at a smile and Max would have done anything to take her pain away. "I'll be fine."

With her life on the line, this woman, of course, would attempt to comfort *him*. Just as she'd put herself in jeopardy for her brother.

But Pip was dragging Caroline along the length of the massive printer, one hand tangled in her hair, the other clutching that damn knife, moving menacingly closer to the engine made up of steel pistons, wheels and chains. It would still be hot to the touch, hot enough to burn.

Pip had stayed late many nights, but never shown any interest in how the press worked.

“Caroline.” Max held her gaze, willing her to read his thoughts. *Beware of the engine.*

He'd shown her how it functioned. He'd told her it could be dangerous.

Love. Sweetheart. Darling. Max silently chanted feelings, disguised as words. Words he should have told her already.

She dipped her chin. The instant she was free Max fully intended to say them all. He didn't care if her brother heard, or Beckworth or even Winterhope.

The entire *ton* could go to Hades, for all he cared.

As long as she was safe. Nothing else mattered.

“Have a care,” he added.

“Enough!” Pip shouted. His face had turned an unpleasant shade of red, his trembling and twitching growing more noticeable. Caroline winced at the sudden noise, and Max's heart clenched at the sight.

The more frightened and desperate Pip was, the more dangerous this situation became. But Max could not give in and allow the man to leave with her. He would rather die than see Caroline hurt.

“My carriage is waiting outside. You and I can go to the docks together,” Max said. “Take me instead.”

“No. No.” Caroline protested, one tear finally escaping, rolling down her cheek. “I’m all right. I’ll be fine.”

“That’s enough!” Pip turned to shout at her, dragging her back with him several steps.

In his haste, however, he knocked the side of his head into one of the cylinders and his entire body jerked.

Everything that followed occurred in a flash.

Sensing Pip’s weakening hold, Caroline twisted out away, grasping one of the chains, which moved the wheel, which started the engine, which turned the cylinders.

Cylinders that weighed hundreds and hundreds of pounds—effective for evenly distributing ink on newspapers, but also extremely dangerous if one got too close...

When Caroline pulled away, Pip’s knife sliced across her throat.

And the second that knife moved, Max pulled his trigger.

As did Beckworth.

As did Standish.

The force of which sent the no-good reporter flying backward.

Knowing how Matilda worked, knowing those gears would show human flesh no mercy, Max threw himself across the remaining distance between him and Caroline, covering her as the metal parts caught, stuttered, and then continued to grind.

“Don’t look! Don’t look.” Max tucked her face against his chest and

pressed his face into her hair as warm liquid soaked the back of his shirt. Holding her down, he opened his eyes enough to see a fine mist of red on the floor around them. A coppery odor filled the air.

No one moved for several awful seconds, all of them seemingly frozen in shock. Matilda went on clanking in the background.

“How does this beast shut off?” Winterhope’s voice finally cut through the tension, and he swiftly made his way over to one end of the machine. A beat later, Beckworth followed his lead and began fiddling with the mechanisms at the other.

“Right there!” Max took his hand off Caroline long enough to point to one of Matilda’s levers, and then tore at his shirt, drawing it over his head and pressing it against Caroline’s neck.

“Got it.” Beckworth pulled. The machine hissed as the press slowed, stuttered, and then ground to a halt.

“I’ve got you, love. Don’t move.” Black edged Max’s vision.

Blood had never bothered Maxwell all that much. But this was different. Some of this was Caroline’s. “We need a doctor!” He yelled across to her brother—to anyone. “Now!”

I THINK I MIGHT FAINT



*I*t was a nightmare—a terrible, gruesome nightmare. It had to be.

First, she'd been caught coming out of the closet by her brother. They weren't alone. Then that horrible man... Caroline swallowed, feeling sick.

Because there was blood. So much blood.

When she moved to turn her head, Maxwell stopped her.

“Don't look.” Max somehow dragged both of them away from the carnage and then held the sides of her face, searching her eyes. “He cut you.”

One of his lenses was missing and tiny specks of blood covered the remaining one. But he didn't seem to notice. All his attention was on her.

“Did it break Matilda—”

“I can replace her.” His voice was tight, strained. He sounded afraid. “I can't replace you.”

For a second their eyes locked and she wanted to believe she saw her love mirrored in his.

“I'm all right. It's just a scratch.” Caroline went to pull his shirt away from her neck, but when she touched it, her fingertips came away covered in blood.

Her stomach rolled, and the world began to spin. “I’m not sure,” she said. “I’ve never done so before. But...”

“I’m here. I’ve got you, sweetheart.”

“I think I might faint.”

“Just hold still. Try not to move.”

She barely nodded before slipping into oblivion.

When she opened her eyes, she thought she felt dizzy again, but then realized she was being lifted into a carriage—*Max’s carriage*.

Then she was laying on... She turned her head and found Max peering down at her.

Her pillow was his lap.

The comforting arms holding her were his.

Those arms tightened. “You scared me, love.”

Love?

“Where...? What...?”

“We’re going to your mother’s house. Your brother and his wife are right behind us. A doctor’s been sent for.”

Sunlight slanted through the carriage windows and the events of last night—this morning?—came rushing back. Caroline moved her hand to her throat; this time her fingertips touched dry fabric.

“It wasn’t your blood.” Max’s expression was pained. “Most wasn’t, anyway. *Thank God*. Your wound seems to have stopped bleeding, but you’ll see a doctor regardless.”

“You’re so bossy,” Caroline said.

“Because I’m your boss. But not much longer.” His jaw set.

What did he mean by that? But then she realized. They’d caught the villain—more than that. Regardless, Max didn’t need her help any longer.

“It was Pip,” she said. “He was the one sabotaging the paper.”

“Yes.”

“You called me *love*.”

“Yes.”

“We never talked about that,” Caroline pointed out. “Because you said you could never offer for me.”

“Because I’m a fool.”

“Do you want to talk about it now?”

Maxwell's eyes met hers, and in that moment, everything else seemed to fade away. His fingers gently brushed her cheek. "Do you?"

“Yes.” She gazed at him, her heart pounding in her chest, waiting for his words with bated breath. But they weren’t what she expected.

"You're going to be all right, Caroline." Max leaned down, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead. "I promise."

“I know, but.” Caroline's eyes welled up with tears, and dread filled her. "Max," she whispered, her voice trembling, “I—”

"I love you." Max cut her off, his voice filled with sincerity and vulnerability.

“You—wait, what?”

"I've loved you since you came charging at me in the park—full of opinions I needed to hear.”

“I didn’t know it was you!”

She’d never seen such a tender expression as the one on Maxwell’s face.

“Everything you said that day was perfect—things I didn’t know I needed to hear. How could I not fall for you?”

“Really?” Was she dreaming now?

“I didn’t know how empty my life was—before.” He closed his eyes and some of the blood drained out of his face. “And to think—” His voice broke.

“I love you too,” she hurried to say. “Oh, Max. Oh, Max. I couldn’t help but love you.”

“I don’t deserve you.” He leaned in, his lips meeting hers in a gentle, sweet kiss. It was as gentle and vulnerable as this newfound love. “But I’m not letting you go.”

“What about your secret?”

“I’ll worry about that.”

She pressed her hand against his chest, for comfort—to feel the rhythm of his heart beating. Her palm touched bare flesh.

“You aren’t wearing a shirt.” Her eyelids felt heavy, her mind foggy.

“Right.” But then he touched his fingertips to her mouth. “Rest, love. We’ll discuss everything later.”

It was enough. It had to be.

For now.

Caroline nestled into Max's comforting embrace, giving in to the hypnotizing rhythm of the horses' hooves. She was suddenly so very tired, and her entire body ached.

Alone with Max, however, the outside world ceased to exist. They were two souls, bound together by fate and passion.

He'd said he loved her.

She closed her eyes, letting go of her fears, resting in this man's arms.

Not knowing what the future held, but releasing her dreams to fate, she succumbed to sleep.

Her mother had been right again.

Because he loved her. And she loved him.

She hoped it was enough.

COOLING HIS HEELS, AGAIN



Max was a relatively patient man, but when it came to cooling his heels while others attended to Caroline...

He was not.

Winterhope and Beckworth were reporting everything back to Malum and their team, and had promised they'd meet with one of their people at Scotland Yard. Aside from that, Max barely remembered what had been said in those frantic minutes after Pip...

The more he tried not to dwell on the events of a few hours before, the more they haunted him—the memory of his reporter holding a knife at Caroline's neck, of her being manhandled around the printing press, and then... so much blood. There was also the sound of the gears, almost grinding to a halt, and then turning again.

Not to mention the smell.

He'd thought he'd seen everything. Apparently, he had not.

He hadn't known Pip particularly well, but he had worked alongside the man for months, trusted him as much as he'd trusted any of his employees. For him to have died in such a way, only minutes after his betrayal was discovered, after taking an innocent woman hostage—Max never would have

guessed the feeble little man was capable of such treachery.

Crossing the length of Mrs. Rutherford's drawing room for what felt like the thousandth time, Max rubbed the back of his neck, scrubbed a hand down his face, and tugged at his hair.

He'd had no choice but to hand her over to her mother and sister's care, but he'd refused to leave until he knew all the details of her condition.

Mrs. Rutherford had suggested Max dash home to bathe and return later. They would know more then, she'd said. When Max had refused, she'd given him a look of approval and left the room. Two minutes later she'd returned with a few linen cloths and a small basin of warm water.

By the time he was finished, the water had turned completely red. But that had been hours ago. Hadn't it?

What was taking so long?

Right when he was at his wits' end, the door opened to admit Caroline's brother.

"How is she?" Max's voice caught.

"She's sleeping," Standish said. "She'll have a scar, but Dr. Hill says the cut was superficial. She's not in any danger."

The words were exactly what Max needed to hear, and dizzy at the news, he all but fell onto the settee behind him. And then exhaled a long, shaking sigh of relief.

"We need to talk." Standish took the chair across from Max.

Nearly a year ago, Max had all but blackmailed the man seated across from him. Today, he would beg for permission to marry his sister.

"I ought to call you out." Standish leaned forward, resting his arms on his

knees, his hands dangling between them.

“You should.” But Max hadn’t slept in over twenty-four hours and the right words suddenly eluded him. As a result, he got straight to the point. “I love her,” he said. “I want to marry her.”

“You’d be a dead man if you didn’t.” Reed Rutherford might be new to the *ton*, but that didn’t mean he was intimidated by any of them. “Have you asked her yet?”

He had not. Not because he felt even an ounce of reluctance, but because he wanted her fully alert and well when they had that particular discussion.

“Not yet.”

“She’s not going to appreciate you asking me first.” Her brother let out a hint of a laugh for the first time since he’d barged into Max’s office at the Gazette. “But I do.”

“It’s complicated,” Max said. “As her brother, you deserve to know who I am—what I am.” Exposing his secrets to Standish was risky—because of the animosity from their previous association. The earl had no reason to keep Max’s secret to himself.

In the past, Max had always put his mother’s needs above everything else. And although he’d continue protecting and caring for her, going forward, his first priority would be Caroline.

She was his future. Or would be, if she didn’t hate him when she learned the truth.

“I’m not who she thinks I am—or who *anyone* thinks I am,” Max began. “Might as well come clean with you first.”

“What do you mean?” Standish glowered.

“I was twelve when I learned the truth about my family. They say one never hears anything good when they’re eavesdropping. Let me assure you, wiser words have never been spoken.”

“Are you talking about the rumors about your father?”

Max’s head snapped up and he clamped his mouth shut. What did Standish know?

The man smirked. “I’m not as uninformed of society’s goings-on as my sister thinks I am. Hell, as most people think I am. And I’m not inclined to change anyone’s opinion. Being underestimated comes in handy sometimes, as I’m sure you know.” Standish’s stare locked with Max’s. “But, regarding the Helton earldom, people *know*. According to my mother, they’ve known for a very long time.”

“But... how?” More importantly, “Why hasn’t anyone...?”

“No one blames you. No one even knows if it’s true. With no one to challenge the legitimacy, they could only speculate.”

“But it *is* true. The worst of it, anyway. My father was an imposter.” Max spoke words he’d kept locked up for a lifetime. “My mother knew. They were fighting over it that day. He was afraid a servant had found out. She said he was being paranoid but then admitted that she almost wished she’d exposed him the day he came forward. To my knowledge, though, she’s never told a soul.” His mother had promised his father that she would never share his secret, but not because she loved her husband.

“Because she’d lose her title?”

“Because her son would lose it.” Max shook his head at the irony of that decision. Because Max had kept the secret for *her*.

“I see.” Standish was watching him closely, a contemplative look in his

eyes. But then he sighed and averted his gaze. "I'm pretty sure Caroline already knows."

"About my father...?"

Standish nodded.

Max should have been surprised by this. But she'd seen the seriousness of his troubles before she'd even met him. He should have realized she would uncover his secret when it was in danger of being exposed. Of course she knew.

As did her mother, her brother... most likely her sister-in-law and sisters...

"Lady Caroline, I believe, values transparency and truthfulness more than anyone I know. I can't burden her with a title that isn't mine to give."

"It would be a burden if she cared about that sort of thing. But trust me, she understands not all our secrets need airing."

The earl dropped his stare to the floor, and Max realized that Standish must still have secrets of his own.

"You didn't start that fire," Max said.

Standish's eyes narrowed and locked with his own. "Of course I didn't."

Incredibly, Max believed him. "So why not cooperate with the investigation?"

The other man clamped his mouth shut.

As the Gazette's publisher, Max did his best to give readers the truth... but, he supposed, they didn't need to hear everyone's speculation. "I owe you an apology."

"No." Standish waved a hand dismissively. "I don't want preferential

treatment. It'll only make matters worse."

"I'm not sure your sister will agree." Max felt the corner of his mouth jump. Ultimately, Max would accommodate her wishes above all.

"You're probably right."

With all that out in the open, Max cocked a brow. "You'll give us your blessing, then."

"You can ask her when she's feeling better. Can I give you a bit of advice first?"

"I'm not sure I'll take it."

"You smell like death. Go home and wash up first."

YOUR MAX



“*I* think”—Doctor Finley winked—“Lady Caroline is going to live. Which makes me rather useless, I’m afraid. But just in case, I’ll leave something for the pain.” Before he could reach into his carpet bag, however, Caroline was shaking her head.

“If that’s what I think it is, you can keep it.” Caroline didn’t want to sound rude but the last thing she needed was laudanum. “I’ll be fine.”

Caroline’s mother held her gaze and they both nodded. “We’ll send for you if anything changes. Willowbark will suffice for now.”

What Caroline really needed was Max.

Her mother escorted their long-time family doctor to the door and Caroline glanced toward the tall window that faced the street. *Where was he?*

She had not imagined their exchange in the carriage earlier that morning. He had professed his love but then urged her not to concern herself with his secrets. Dratted man. Didn’t he realize she didn’t care about his title?

Before leaving Caroline alone with her mother and the doctor, Goldie had confirmed that Pip had indeed died. She said he’d been sending codes to criminals, but aside from that, and aside from promising Caroline that Reed was not going to challenge Mr. Black, she had been annoyingly stingy with

information. They certainly hadn't addressed her 'napping' in one of the Gazette's old closets—or the real reason Caroline had come out looking disheveled.

“He needed to clean up.” Her mother's voice broke through Caroline's reverie as she returned to her chair beside Caroline's bed. “But he'll be back. Perhaps tomorrow morning...”

Anticipation fluttered in her chest, along with impatience.

It was peculiar, feeling this almost excruciating need for another person... She longed for his presence, for his touch, for the soothing reassurance only Max could provide.

“You needn't worry, Caroline.”

“Now that I'm a grown woman, you can stop doing that,” Caroline grumbled, pondering how she'd bear the endless wait ahead.

“What am I doing?” Her mother's eyes widened in faux innocence.

“Reading my mind.”

“You'll do the same with your children, I'm sure. They grow up but you never stop worrying...”

With good reason. Caroline nodded.

“Max does that sometimes,” she said. Max had a unique gift, one that allowed him to delve deeper than just reading her thoughts—he could sense her emotions, her desires, her very soul.

“Of course he does,” her mother said, patting her hand affectionately. “Now. You get some sleep. You've had a very long day and I have a feeling you'll want to be wide awake tomorrow come morning.”

Caroline couldn't help but be curious. “Why will I want to be wide

awake? What do you know?"

"He spoke with Reed." Her mother could not look more satisfied. "Your Max, that is. And if I'm correct, you best be prepared for a very special visit come morning."

Caroline met her mother's gaze, and their unspoken thoughts collided. A visit from Max could only mean one of two things—a proposal of marriage or an apology for the earlier turmoil. She absently touched the bandage on her neck, a reminder of the dangers they'd experienced together.

"I want to look nice," Caroline admitted, her voice filled with a mix of excitement and apprehension.

"Plenty of time for that," Eloisa interjected, entering the room with a tray of tea.

"Perfect timing," Caroline's mother said. "Thank you, Eloisa. Tea is always the best tonic. Drink up, my daughter, and then sleep."

"I'll never be able to sleep," Caroline moaned. It seemed like an impossible task as her mind raced with thoughts of Max and what he might say when he returned. Would he offer his heart? Or... was her mother being overly optimistic? He'd said he wasn't going to be her boss anymore. He couldn't be coming to fire her!

Or did his pending visit have something to do with his secret?

A secret she didn't give two hoots about.

No. It had to be a proposal. Didn't it?

By the time she finished drinking her tea, she wished her mother had never even mentioned the expected visit. The range of possibilities was all just so very... vexing! And contrary to her claim that she'd never sleep,

Caroline was suddenly exhausted.

She drifted in and out of slumber, her dreams filled with Max's presence. Between each fitful nap, she was vaguely aware of her mother and Eloisa sitting beside her, one reading, the other sewing, providing a comforting presence in the dimly lit room.

By morning, when sunlight streamed through the curtains, Caroline opened her eyes, nervous but excited for Max's visit.

She all but burst out of bed and in no time was bathed, had her hair arranged in a fashionable style, and stood wearing an emerald day dress that matched the hue of Max's eyes.

Eloisa had even fashioned a silk scarf to hide the bandage.

Just as Caroline tied off the ribbons on her slippers, a knock sounded at the door and her mother peered inside.

"Don't you look lovely?" she said. "Reed and Lord Helton are finished in the study. *Your Max* is waiting in the drawing room now."

This time the butterflies swarming her chest might as well have been full-sized birds. "Do I look all right?"

"You are stunning." Her mother's mouth curved into a proud smile. "Are you sure you want to go down?"

"Positive," Caroline said. "I feel like I've waited a lifetime for this."

YES



Maxwell Black stood near the fireplace, his typically unyielding countenance softened by the weight of the moment. He had her brother's permission—something he had not taken for granted.

Now he needed to ask his prospective bride herself.

The possibility of being rejected turned his veins to ice.

He'd admitted to loving her, and she'd returned the sentiment. But she might well have been in shock. Max removed a handkerchief from inside his jacket and dabbed at his forehead. Why was it so hot in this godforsaken room?

He only hoped he'd kept her from seeing the worst of that ghastly scene—something no lady should ever witness. Something no *human* should ever witness.

He should have sent her home earlier. He could have protected her better.

The scene he'd left in his print room the night before slammed into him. He'd not blame any of his employees if they never came back.

And although earlier that morning he had received a dispatch from Winterhope saying Malum's men had cleaned up the mess at the offices, Max was in no hurry to see for himself.

Which was just as well. He had far more important business. *Personal* business.

When the door finally opened, he stuffed the linen cloth into a pocket and pivoted to face her. And immediately forgot the little speech he'd rehearsed in his head.

This woman.

Even after the ordeal she'd gone through the day before, Caroline was a vision. The emerald day dress clung to her figure in all the right places, and her chestnut hair had been arranged in intricate curls, framing her face like a halo. She wore no jewels; she didn't need to because her eyes sparkled. And as she stepped into the room, a rush of emotions threatened to overwhelm him.

"Max," she greeted him. Her eyes held a mixture of anticipation and uncertainty, as if she, too, didn't know what to expect.

"Caroline," he replied, his voice steady but tinged with vulnerability only she could provoke.

He took a step toward her, closing the distance between them. "I hope you slept well."

She grimaced. "As well as one can, under the circumstances."

Circumstances Max ought to have prevented.

"You shouldn't have had to see that." He shook his head. "I should have taken you home earlier."

"I'm not sure I would have allowed that," she said. "Besides, you protected me from most of it."

Not enough, though. But... "It should have been me. Your poor neck."

Imagining her injury beneath the scarf she wore was like a punch in his gut.

“I’m fine.”

Of course, she wouldn’t complain or blame him.

“Is that why you’ve come this morning? To apologize? Or do you have something else to say to me?”

Max nodded. It was hard to ignore the ordeal she’d suffered—because of him. But she was right. He had come here for a different reason.

“I do.” He tugged at his cravat.

She waited.

Max gulped and then began. “I’ve lived my life thinking I would never marry. Because of my father’s secrets.” Max spoke around the lump in his throat. “I think you know this.”

“Yes.” Her eyes searched his face, listening, waiting for him to continue.

“You know he was an impostor. Which makes me one as well.”

“Go on.”

He inhaled. “I’d convinced myself I couldn’t burden my bride with the same lie. And I know how you feel about the truth.”

He needed to get this out.

“I am not the true Earl of Helton.” He would make himself very clear. “For my mother’s sake, I’ve never said anything. She’d lose her status, possibly most of her friends. They are everything to her.”

“They mean more to her than her son?”

“No. Of course not. She loves me, but it’s complicated. She just...”

“She is happy with her life.”

“Yes.”

Her immediate understanding shouldn't have surprised him. She understood loyalty. And she quite possibly understood Max more than he did himself.

A clock on the mantel ticked loudly until Caroline reached across the space between them, touching her fingertips to his hand.

“Then we needn't address it. But Max, you *are not* your father. It's not your duty to answer for his sins.”

Her words hung in the air and then... the backs of his eyes burned and he felt lighter.

Just a few words from Caroline Rutherford and the years he'd spent hiding the truth fell away.

It was time he got to the point.

“I had planned on renouncing eventually, but doing so would leave the title dormant. I avoid visiting Hell House but I make sure the tenants' needs are met. I also realize the surrounding area depends on the estate. People depend on me whether I want them to or not. So I live this lie. Is it fair to ask you to live it with me?”

Emotion welled up in his throat, almost closing it.

Standing in the middle of her mother's drawing room, she stared up at him, her sapphire eyes dancing. “Is that your proposal?” Was this minx laughing at him?

“Caroline,” he warned.

But she stopped him by uttering a single syllable.

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Of course I’ll marry you.”

Wait! He hadn’t officially proposed yet. She might have already answered, but seeing as he’d failed to properly court her, he’d do this one thing right, at the very least.

Feeling foolish but determined, he dropped to one knee. He then reached into his pocket and produced a small velvet box.

His mother had wanted him to use a family heirloom, but he’d declined the offer, preferring to begin their lives together with a symbol not connected to his ill-gotten legacy. The ring was set in silver, tiny diamonds surrounding a massive ice blue sapphire, like the petals of a flower. He’d searched for a blue that would match the brilliant color of her eyes, but nothing could compare.

“It’s beautiful,” she gasped.

"Not as beautiful as you. Caroline, I love you," he declared, his voice unwavering. "From the depths of my soul, I love you more than life itself. I’ve only known you a short time, but it’s long enough to know I don’t want a future that doesn’t include Caroline Rutherford.”

Tears glistened in Caroline's eyes as she watched him take the ring out of the box. “So you will settle for this struggling newspaper man? You’ll be my wife?” he asked, his heart pounding in his chest.

“Mrs. Black. Caroline Black.” She grinned. “I like the sound of that.”

Her smile radiant, Caroline didn’t hesitate, but held out her hand, splayed so he could slide the ring onto her finger. It fit perfectly.

“Come up here.” She took both of his hands and tugged him to his feet.

Maxwell gathered her into his arms, and as their lips met, a bright new future unfolded before him.

Before both of them.

“You’re sure it doesn’t bother you? The lie?”

She was shaking her head. “But it isn’t your lie. It won’t be our lie.”

“I’m not the real earl.”

“Because you haven’t wanted to be. But, Maxwell, people need the Earl of Helton. Your estates need the Earl of Helton. Parliament needs an Earl of Helton.”

“And you?”

“I just need you. Whoever you want to be.”

But she was right. He’d hired the best managers, but that was not enough. He’d neglected his responsibilities for too long. “You will be my countess.” He tested the word.

“And you will be my earl. Seeing as we haven’t much choice.” But she was laughing. And the sound of her laughter was one of the best sounds in the world.

Was it really this easy?

She tugged his mouth down to hers, and he willingly allowed her to end this conversation. They had all the time in the world to talk. All the time in the world to plan.

As husband and wife, they would not only share their lives but also their dreams—of being together, of having a family, and so much more.

Together, they would decide where to live, how to raise their family, and what to do with the Gazette.

Because yes, they had stories to live, but they also stories to write.

And from this point forward, they'd write those stories together.

EPILOGUE



SIX MONTHS LATER

“She’s magnificent.” Max couldn’t contain his pride. He put an arm around his wife’s waist and pulled her close.

“I can’t believe she’s finally here,” Caroline said, and then brushed at the corner of her eye.

“You aren’t crying, are you?” He bent forward to see her expression.

“Happy tears.” She sniffed, smiling. “I didn’t think this day would ever come.”

“Neither did I.” If he wasn’t careful, he’d damn near start sobbing himself. Overwhelmed by the momentousness of the occasion, the newlywed couple stood in the Gazette’s office, staring at their new addition in awe.

“What should we name her?” Max asked. Caroline had wanted to leave it up to him, but she belonged to both of them.

“Well.” Caroline turned shining eyes up at him. “What do you think of naming her... Edmund?”

He frowned. “Edmund isn’t a girl’s name.”

“Well, perhaps ‘she’ is actually a ‘he’?” His wife said in a sing-song voice.

Max grimaced.

Before meeting Caroline, he'd devoted himself to Matilda. But he was a married man now. After a very proper wedding at St. Georges on Hanover Square to mark the end of the season and then a month-long honeymoon, they'd returned to London where he'd spent a month trying to get the old printer functioning again.

In the end, they'd ordered a new and improved version—one that had the potential to function continuously.

They'd purchased her—it—him?—using part of Caroline's dowry. Not because Max hadn't the funds himself, but because she had insisted.

"Edmund, eh?" He dropped his arm and carefully stepped around the new beast—upon which safety bars had been installed to protect against them ever experiencing such a tragic accident again.

"Or Farley," Caroline added.

"Not Farley," Max growled.

But something in her voice had him twisting around to see her expression. One of thousands he'd come to love. Because Caroline never failed to delight him.

Most of the time.

"You wouldn't be teasing me, would you?"

Her pink lips twitched. Unable to help himself—because he didn't have to—Max teased her back with a kiss. He initially meant to keep it short and sweet, but that just wasn't possible, and when she slid her arms around his neck, it took on a life of its own.

And would have gone on for several minutes if they hadn't been interrupted by the sudden pitter patter of tiny, clawed paws racing from one

end of the room to the other. The two of them broke apart to see that Alfie had chosen that moment to start circling them wildly, his tail wagging, expressing his boredom with the sharp yelps that only a puppy could make.

Reed and Goldie had gifted Alfie to them two weeks after they'd returned from the continent. Alfie was just one of Pip's litter—a small but energetic dog with fluffy black, tan, and white fur and soulful eyes. The litter, they'd determined, was a product of one too many visits from Lady Helton, who rarely left Charlie at home with the servants.

Pip the dog, it seemed, was not a 'he', but a 'she.'

Caroline had told her mother about their first, serendipitous meeting, so of course, the current running joke amongst the Rutherford clan was that more than one match had begun that day in the park.

Maxwell and Caroline, but also Pip and Charlie.

Caroline picked up the pup and, after giving it a snuggle, peeked up at Max.

"I have something to tell you." Her eyes looked serious, but danced at the same time.

"If you don't want to attend Winterhope's house party, we needn't do so." He smiled and then gestured toward their shiny new printer. "I can get *Edmund* running in a few days, maybe a week. We can leave for Hell House"—she raised her brows—"Helton House right after. Wallace has everything under control here." They'd since replaced Mr. Pip, and also hired another editor.

Caroline and Max had discussed their options several times, but in the end, had decided they'd spend at least part of the year in the country, where Max needed to reestablish himself anyway.

Besides that, the London heat—not to mention the stench—was suffocating this time of year. No one remained in London during August if it wasn't necessary. Unless they owned a struggling newspaper, that was.

“That’s not it at all. I’m actually looking forward to seeing his stables. And as your society writer, need I remind you that it’s my responsibility to report all the happenings at such a distinguished affair?”

“You don’t have to—”

“But I want to. But that’s not what I need to tell you today.” Caroline clasped her hands behind her back and, walking high in the instep and looking like the cat who ate the canary, strolled around to the back of Edmund.

What was his little minx up to?

“If you’re sure...”

“Oh, I am. But I do want to be settled at Helton House before the winter holidays.”

Max nodded, a little confused. “Whenever you want, Sweetheart. I’ll make sure we arrive long before the first snowfall, and once we’re there, we’ll make our own traditions.”

She dipped her chin, meeting his eyes from behind the Gazette’s new pride and joy, and then, looking less than sure of herself, touched her fingertips to her bodice.

“I like the sound of that.” She spoke quite deliberately.

Max scratched his head. He was still missing something.

She didn’t look upset, but she looked... softer than usual. And a little...*dreamy*, if that was possible.

“Caroline? Is something wrong?”

She blinked a few times, her eyes shining again. “I thought there might be at first,” she said. “But, as it turns out, I’m perfectly fine—more than fine, in fact.” The most beautiful eyes in the world locked with his. She licked her lips and then cleared her throat. “I’m expecting.”

“You’re...” Max would have sprinted around to gather her into his arms if he didn’t feel like his legs would collapse beneath him.

He didn’t have to, however, because Caroline rushed around to him instead. She steered him into the nearest chair. “Don’t move,” she said. Max was vaguely aware that she’d left the room.

“We’re going to have a baby.” He said the words out loud, thinking he’d make better sense of them that way. Could it be true? Was he, Maxwell Black, the bogus Earl of Helton, going to be a...

“I’m going to be a father?” Black swam around his vision. All of this, Caroline, the Gazette, this new printer, and now... He found himself at a loss for words.

“Drink up.” Caroline had returned with a tumbler of scotch from his office. “I’ve had time to get used to the idea. I felt similarly when I first found out, if that helps.” She grinned.

After taking a healthy swallow, he set the tumbler down, not about to let her disappear again.

“Come here.” He pulled her to sit sideways on his lap, one arm around her back so he could rest the opposite hand on her taut belly. Only, it wasn’t as taut as usual. And being the man who’d spent the summer memorizing every inch of her skin, he was surprised he hadn’t noticed earlier.

“I suppose you thought I was eating too many pastries.” Strained laughter

bubbled out of her. “That marrying you has made me happy and fat.”

“Eat as many pastries as you want.” Keeping his hand over their child, he shifted them so he could watch her expression. “How do you feel? Have you been ill? We can leave for the country now if you want.”

But she was shaking her head, watching him. “I’m fine, really. As long as you are happy? Are you? We’ve only been married four months, and this is all rather soon.” Max hated that she’d have any doubts.

“I am so happy that it scares me,” he said, his voice catching. But it was true. “Every night after you fall asleep, I lie awake, marveling at my good fortune. I never thought I could wake up so happy every day, simply knowing I have you in my life. And now...”

He blinked, in awe that he wasn’t dreaming. He was, in fact, the luckiest man in all of England. “I can have the carriage packed up this afternoon. I can hire a mechanic to finish assembling this beast.”

She sighed and then rested her head on Max’s shoulder. “There’s no hurry. I know how you feel about your printers. We have plenty of time to get Edmund running properly first.”

They would attend Winterhope’s house party, and then Max would take his wife home. He’d give her carte blanche to replace furnishings, rugs, and wall-coverings. And of course, they had a nursery to set up.

They would make Hell House into a home, for both of them, but also for Alfie, and eventually their child.

“When did you know? How did you find out?” Max wanted to know everything.

“I suspected last week. The midwife confirmed it this morning.”

“So you were not shopping...”

“No. I was not shopping.” Her eyes glistened. Just when Max didn’t believe he could be any happier...

“Have I told you lately how much I love you?” he asked.

“At least a thousand times this week.” She wiggled her bum, making Max grateful they were alone. But also pleased that he’d had a mattress delivered to the office just last week—and stored in the nearby closet.

But she was a lady. And she was with child.

“How do you feel now, are you tired? Shouldn’t you be resting?” he asked.

“I’m not tired at all.” She straightened, smiling. And then she flicked a glimpse toward the back of the room. “In fact, I wouldn’t be opposed to... celebrating...”

“It’s important to celebrate the good things in life.”

“I quite agree.”

She hopped of his lap, taking his hand in hers, and led him to their secret place.

And Max happily followed.

As did Alfie.

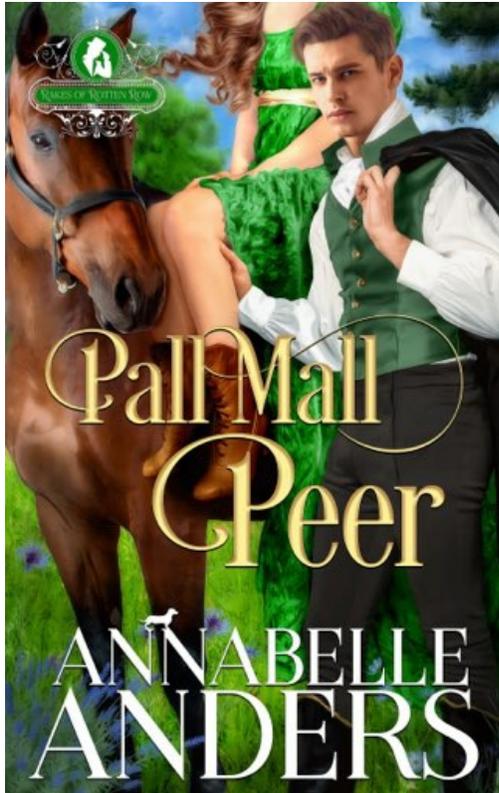
—The End—

Thank you so much for reading Caroline and Maxwell’s happily ever after!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Married to the same man for over 25 years, I am a mother to three children and two Miniature Wiener dogs.

After owning a business and experiencing considerable success, my husband and I got caught in the financial crisis and lost everything in 2008; our business, our home, even our car.

At this point, I put my B.A. in Poly Sci to use and took work as a waitress and bartender (Insert irony). Unwilling to give up on a professional life, I simultaneously went back to college and obtained a degree in EnergyManagement.

And then the energy market dropped off.

And then my dog died.

I can only be grateful for this series of unfortunate events, for, with nothing to lose and completely demoralized, I sat down and began to write the romance novels which had until then, existed only my imagination. After publishing over twenty novels now, with one having been nominated for RWA's Distinguished TMRITA Award in 2019, I am happy to tell you that I have finally found my place in life.

Thank you so much for being a part of my journey!

To find out more about my books, and also to download a free novella, get all the info at my website!

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