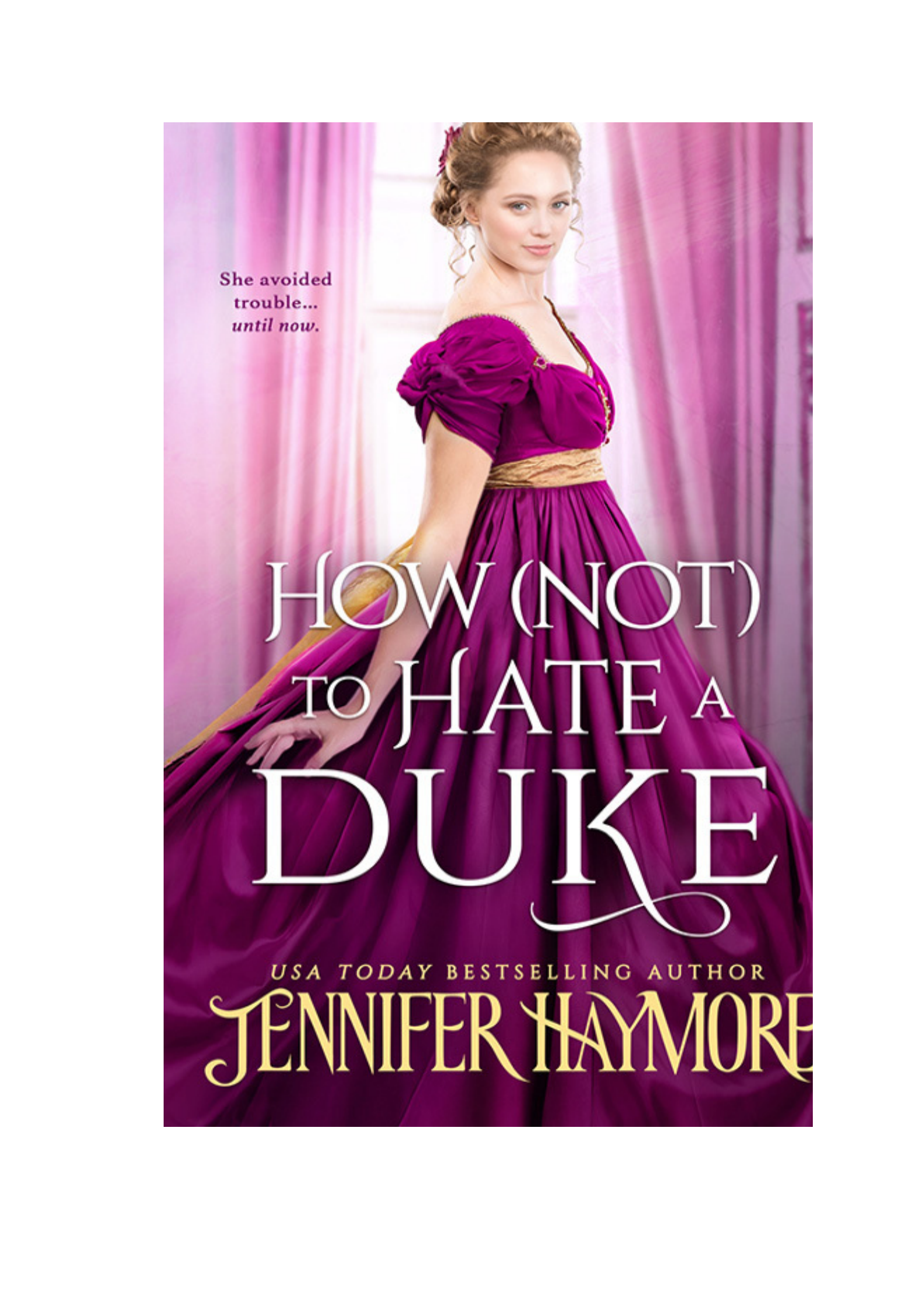
A woman with her hair styled in an updo, wearing a vibrant purple off-the-shoulder gown with a gold belt, stands in front of pink curtains. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting an indoor setting with a window.

She avoided
trouble...
until now.

HOW (NOT) TO HATE A DUKE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JENNIFER HAYMORE



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Chapter One

Georgiana hid a yawn behind her gloved hand.

She shouldn't be so bored. She should be gazing adoringly at the young man who'd approached her and her mother during their walk in the park and who was now gushing effusively about the lovely weather.

But it had been a long Season. She was exhausted. Thank God it would soon be over.

Georgiana twisted a smile onto her face as the gentleman turned to her, beaming. What was his name? Mr...Worsley? Maybe. She truly couldn't remember. The many faces of the bachelors who'd expressed interest in her this Season had begun to merge together into one fortune-hunting facade.

They were all the same. She continued to parade through the marriage mart year after year in the hopes that one day she might find someone different, but it was hopeless. When it came to Georgiana Milford, the only thing men were interested in was her inheritance. Not one of the "potential husbands" she'd met had ever tried to pry beneath the glittering surface of the richest heiress in England.

"What do you think, Miss Milford?" Mr. Maybe-Worsley asked.

Oh dear. She hadn't been listening. She turned to her mother. "What do *you* think, Mama?" she asked, cranking her smile up another ten degrees.

Maybe she'd never find someone to spend her life with. Honestly, that would be far better than giving away her inheritance to someone who would thrust her aside once he had his hands on her fortune.

"I don't believe it will rain again, Mr. Webley," her mother said. "That spot of rain this morning was exactly what we all needed, but I daresay those clouds will just blow past and our day will continue to be exquisite."

Oh, right, *Webley*. That was his name. Regret flushed

through Georgiana—it wasn't his fault she hadn't remembered. But the way he looked at her—she *knew* that greedy expression. She'd seen it too many times not to be able to decipher it. He was exactly like the rest of them.

“I do hope you're correct, Mrs. Milford.”

“Oh, Eliza, is that you?” someone called in a high-pitched, singsong voice.

Georgiana looked past Mr. Webley to see a knot of older ladies huddled farther down the path. One of them was waving at them, gesturing at Georgiana's mother.

Thankfully, that was Webley's cue to go. He bowed to them both, wished them a good afternoon, and took his leave. As he strode off, Mama murmured, “Well, what did you think?”

Georgiana gave a careless shrug.

“Oh, Gigi.” Her mother sighed. “I think he was lovely. Very kind and attentive, and handsome, to boot.”

“Was he?” Georgiana frowned. “I didn't notice.”

As they approached her mother's friends, Georgiana craned her neck, trying to catch a glimpse of Worsley/Webley to confirm his handsomeness, but he had turned the bend in the path. Instead, her gaze snagged with another man's. This man was *definitely* handsome.

He walked alone, just coming round the bend toward them. His form was tall and dark, but his ocean-blue eyes pierced straight through her from a distance.

Not Worsley/Webley.

Someone different.

Far more potent.

Far more despicable.

Georgiana yanked her gaze away.

The Duke of Desborough was walking toward them on the footpath at Hyde Park. Good God. If her mother saw him—

She realized her heart was pounding and she had stopped

breathing.

For heaven's sake! What an absurd reaction to the man known far and wide as the Duke of Despots—a title, along with his legal one, he'd inherited from his despotic father. By all accounts, he had followed in the old duke's footsteps: tyrannical to his employees and tenants. Demeaning and dismissive of women and whoever else he considered beneath him. Careless of and destructive to the vast lands under his control. And her father's sworn enemy.

She risked another glance at him. He'd swiveled away and was rounding the bend again in the opposite direction.

The man was avoiding them.

She pulled in a relieved breath but then straightened her shoulders and pasted on a smile. That man didn't deserve any type of response from her. Not beyond disgust, anyway. She stepped up to the ladies, who started quizzing her mother about her hat. Mama raised her fingers to stroke one of the peacock feathers. "Isn't it lovely? Georgiana designed it—"

Hands pressed on Georgiana's shoulders. "Boo!"

She jumped a foot into the air and spun around, palm to chest, to see her dear friend Charlotte, a broad smile on her pretty face.

"Charlotte," she gasped. "You scared me!"

"Sorry!" Charlotte took Georgiana's hand in her own and squeezed tightly. "It's just that I'm so happy to see you!"

"Me too." Georgiana peered beyond Charlotte, searching for her friend's companion. "Are you here with Lord Trevelyan?"

"I am. He's over there." Charlotte gestured to a clump of tall bushes. Behind the thick greenery, Georgiana could only vaguely see the dappled form of Charlotte's husband, the Earl of Trevelyan, speaking to another man. "He's talking to a gardener about tree pests. I'm glad you showed up, because I was about to go out of my mind. This is not why one ventures out to Hyde Park at the fashionable hour!" Charlotte laughed lightly, not at all annoyed by her husband's eccentricities. "Anyhow, he told me to come talk to you and maybe walk

with you for a while, because evidently, tree pests require *quite* a bit of discussion.”

Georgiana waited for a break in the ladies’ conversation, then asked, “Would it be all right if Charlotte and I walk for a while, Mama?”

Her mother waved her off. “Of course, dear. Don’t be gone too long, though.”

“We won’t,” Charlotte promised.

Arm in arm, Georgiana and Charlotte strolled away. The early evening was pleasant and warm, the park crowded with people dressed in the height of fashion who were there to see and be seen.

They turned the bend away from the ladies and started along the footpath that ran parallel to Rotten Row, where members of the haute ton drove by showing off their spirited stallions and their fancy phaetons and curricles. Charlotte squeezed her fingers. “The Season is almost over,” she said quietly. “I imagine you’re thrilled.”

“*Ecstatic*,” Georgiana said.

“I am also glad. I cannot wait to get out of London for a spell. It’s so filthy this time of year.”

Georgiana glanced up at the clear blue sky. “Not today.”

Charlotte sighed. “True. Today is beautiful, thanks to the rain this morning. But they are predicting tomorrow will be hot again, and...” She let her voice dwindle.

Georgiana well knew what the heat brought to London—putrid air and pestilence. Yet, she planned to remain here for the remainder of summer, her days busy helping her father with his business and her nights—thankfully, *finally*—peaceful and quiet.

“When are you leaving town?” she asked Charlotte.

“Next month. We’re not returning to Crag’s End right away, though,” she said. “Finn and I are traveling to Derbyshire to attend Lord and Lady Merrick’s house party.”

“You are?” Georgiana asked in surprise. Charlotte’s husband was known far and wide as the most reclusive lord in England. He was the kind of man who would, time after time, choose to converse with a gardener over a group of people from his own class. “How on earth did you convince the earl to agree to that?”

Charlotte laughed softly. “Oh, I quickly learned just how pliable that man is.” She rubbed her gloved fingers in front of her. “With only a little effort on my part, he turns into putty in my hands.”

“What kind of effort?” Georgiana asked.

Charlotte just gave her a secretive smile, and suddenly Georgiana was certain her friend was referring to something private and intimate, and heat prickled her cheeks. She cleared her throat. “Well...that sounds very nice. I’m sure you’ll have a wonderful time.”

“I’m sure we will.” They passed a couple sitting on a bench and exchanged polite nods with the pair before Charlotte added, “But I think it would be even more fun if you were there.”

“I wasn’t invited,” Georgiana said instantly. While some, like Charlotte and the earl, easily accepted Georgiana and her family into the more venerated aristocratic circles, others shunned them. Her father hadn’t been born into his riches but had worked to amass his great fortune and was now one of the wealthiest men in England. Many spurned the Milfords because their fortune was new and hard-won rather than passed down by generations of men who’d long ago raped and pillaged for it.

Charlotte squeezed her arm. “I’ve spoken to Lady Merrick, and she said she’d be pleased to have you.”

“I don’t believe I’ve ever been introduced to Lady Merrick.”

“I promise you’ll adore her,” Charlotte said. “Just as I do. And it’ll be so much fun! A week or two of leisure in the hottest month of summer before returning to your toils in the fetid stench of London.” She wrinkled her nose.

“Hm.” Georgiana tapped her chin. She actually adored London at all times of the year. Its stench smelled like home to her, but then again, so did the crisp smells of cut grass and flowers of the country.

Georgiana’s love of London didn’t mean she didn’t like to leave it once in a while, however. She adored holidays and took them whenever she could. Her wanderlust had led to her being one of the most well-traveled young ladies of her class in England. She’d even been to Canada, a faraway, wild place few people of the ton could claim to have visited.

“How long will you stay?” she asked Charlotte.

“Until the end of August. Finn has to return to London after that.” Charlotte shook her head, but a smile lit her eyes. “I cannot believe how busy that man is with all his various projects and partnerships.” She nudged Georgiana in the ribs. “He’s nearly as busy as *you*.”

“The end of summer will be especially busy.” Georgiana smiled and told her friend the news. “My sister is coming. We expect her to arrive the last week of August.”

Charlotte clapped her hands together in delight. “Oh, that’s wonderful! Elizabeth mentioned in her last letter that she might be visiting. My goodness...how long has it been?”

“Almost nine years,” Georgiana said. Nine years, but it felt like a lifetime.

“Is she coming home to stay?”

Georgiana hesitated. “I hope so, but I’m not sure. My father refuses to commit one way or the other.” She sighed. “But this is her home, after all. Not to mention, the United States has declared war on England again. I worry about her safety there.”

“But she is in Nova Scotia, isn’t she? That should be far from the battlefields.”

“I hope it will be, but one never knows.”

Georgiana’s older sister had been sent to Halifax abruptly when Georgiana was sixteen years old, leaving her bereft at

the sudden loss of her confidante and best friend. It had been so sudden, so unexpected. But her parents had said they wanted to allow Lizzie to live in an exciting new land with their aunt and uncle, and over time, Georgiana had grown to accept her sister's absence.

But nine years was too long, and certainly Lizzie must be ready to come home to stay. It would be so wonderful to have their family together and whole again.

"I hope she will stay," Charlotte said. "But either way, I'd love to see her."

"You must come up for a visit."

"I will," Charlotte promised. Then, she added, "You know, it's also perfect timing for the house party. You can come have a wonderful time with us, then return to London to be with your sister when she arrives."

"Hmm." Georgiana cocked an eyebrow. "Will there be any unmarried gentlemen in attendance?"

Charlotte grinned. "Enough that your mother will see a few potential future love matches for you and allow you to go. She won't have to know of my secret vow to keep them away from you."

"You'd scare the fortune hunters away?" Georgiana batted her lashes at her friend. "You'd do that for me?"

"I promise I will. I'll bare my claws and be so ferocious they won't dare to come within ten feet of you."

Georgiana laughed. "That's very kind of you, but honestly, I am adept at keeping them away all by myself."

"Then between the two of us, we will be certain to repel them."

She thought about it. The truth was, once she'd learned Lizzie was coming home, she'd been so excited, she'd been having trouble focusing on her work. A parent-free house party would be an excellent diversion.

"I admit I am tempted."

“Tempted?” murmured a low, masculine voice directly behind them. “To do *what*, pray tell?”

A few things happened at once. Georgiana turned her head, then jerked back when her gaze encountered the chiseled jaw of the Duke of Desborough, the smooth slope of his nose, the long, dark lashes, and the wicked glint in his sapphire eyes.

Charlotte gave a delighted laugh, exclaiming, “Ridge!”

Meanwhile, Georgiana’s heel caught on the edge of the path, and she lurched back, her arms pinwheeling as she tried to recapture her balance. To no avail. She fell, backside first, into a hawthorn bush.

With catlike reflexes, the despicable duke lunged forward, grasping Georgiana around the waist and pulling her upright, but not before several thorns caught the back of her dress. As she regained her feet, inhaling his fresh scent of rosemary and cloves, the screech of tearing fabric rent the air.

Wonderful.

Chapter Two

Theophilus St. Clair, the Seventh Duke of Desborough, “Theo” to his family, “Ridge” to his friends on account of spending the first thirty years of his life as Lord Ridgemont, and “Your Grace” to everyone else, held on to Miss Georgiana Milford for a second longer than strictly necessary.

He knew she’d regained her footing, but he couldn’t help it. She had a tiny waist—one he could almost span with his hands. He looked down at her perfect face and breathed her in, his senses filling with a soft rose perfume. She reminded him of a rose, too—soft and delicate and beautiful and—

“You!” she spat.

And a shrew.

He let go, quelling the urge to tug on the silky blond lock that curled at her ear.

“Oh dear,” Charlotte fretted. “Georgiana, your poor dress.”

Miss Milford twisted to take in the damage her dress had sustained, then groaned.

“Forgive me, ladies,” Theo said. “I’m sorry to have startled you—though I’m quite certain my footsteps were loud enough to foretell my arrival from quite a distance.”

Miss Milford’s changeable hazel eyes snapped to his, a fierce light glowing in them. “I was focused,” the pretty little virago bit out. “On my conversation with my *friend*.”

Theo raised a brow. “As I said. Apologies.” He gave a small, stiff bow. When he rose, Charlotte smiled warmly at him while the lady standing beside her wore a pinched, surly expression.

“I didn’t know you were in London, Ridge,” Charlotte said.

“I just arrived yesterday. I’ve been busy with—” He stopped abruptly. He had no intention of sharing what had been occupying his time. Not with Miss Milford, of all people, in hearing range. He gave Charlotte a crooked grin. “Well, you know.” He shrugged carelessly, though his life of late was

anything but careless, and wrapped himself in an air of casual unconcern. “I needed to get away.”

“Understandable.” Charlotte glanced at her scowling friend again. “I don’t think we should continue our walk, Georgiana. In fact, you probably shouldn’t move at all. I fear your dress will disintegrate into ribbons if you do.”

Now that was an image Theo could dwell on all night. Georgiana Milford, bare from top to toes, her clothes in tatters at her feet.

Oh, yes. He could picture that perfect, petite body, rounded softly in all the right places. All that pale, soft, womanly skin to caress...

She glared daggers at him.

The Milfords hated Theo, and he knew why—“the sins of the father,” and all that. Not to mention that everything he did seemed to go contrary to their pretentious standards. Their land bordered his ducal estate in Bedfordshire, and they made for unfriendly, unpleasant, and uncompromising neighbors.

It was frustrating as hell. Nobody in Bedfordshire had attempted to get to know Theo well enough to realize he was nothing like his father. He’d tried to demonstrate that, unlike the previous duke, this Duke of Desborough was going to try to do right by his community. He was making improvements on the land, on his house, and in the village. Yet people still whispered about him. They wouldn’t meet his eyes. He’d entered the pub in the village one day last month, and every single patron had set their pints down and walked out before he’d said a word.

He had grown cold all over. Stiffly, he’d strode out of the place, not looking back. The following day, he’d escaped from Bedfordshire altogether. He’d just needed to be away from it all.

The Milfords were one of the most prominent families in Bedfordshire. For the past ten months, Georgiana’s father had played no small part in Theo’s struggle to bring Clairwood Park back to life. Over and over, he’d blocked Theo’s

attempts, sabotaged his relationships, made progress difficult. Why? It was ridiculous and pointless, but evidently Milford wanted to carry on the feud Theo's father had started that should have died along with him. Little had Theo known that he'd been heir not only to a dukedom but also the Milfords' hatred and vindictiveness.

Charlotte, who'd been fretting over Thomas Milford's spawn, turned to him. "I'm sorry to ask this of you, Ridge, but would you mind fetching Mrs. Milford for us? Ask her to summon their carriage then meet us"—she gestured beyond the row of trees to where the carriage and horse traffic was passing—"just over there."

Theo's heart sank. He knew how that would go. But he would not deny the Countess of Trevelyan anything. He'd do his best.

"Of course."

As he turned to do as she asked, Charlotte caught his forearm. "Will you call on us this week? Finn would love to see you."

"I'd love to see him as well," Theo said. "I'll call at your house tomorrow afternoon." He gave another formal bow and walked away, thoughts of Georgiana Milford swirling in his head. As they were neighbors, albeit unfriendly ones, he'd known her when they were children, but he'd been six years older than her, determined to not bestow his attention on any girl, no matter how pretty, and they never spoke face to face. The first time he'd been "officially" introduced to her was last year, at the ill-fated engagement party of Charlotte and Trevelyan. He'd been struck by her haughty beauty then and equally struck in the handful of times he'd seen her since.

He'd also been surprised by the level of her contempt for him. It was true—thanks to his father, who'd been a cruel, heartless, ill-tempered, and ill-mannered bastard, many people regarded him with contempt. But, thanks to her father's influence, no doubt, whenever she laid eyes on him, her expression dripped with disdain.

He often fantasized about how she'd look if he kissed that

disdain right off that beautiful face. How she'd look gazing up at him not with hatred but with desire.

That thought was enough to bring his body flaring to life, but just ahead, there was her mother in the flesh, standing on the path and talking animatedly to a group of other matrons. Gazing upon her made Theo's body temperature plummet to something in the arctic zone.

Straightening his spine, he strode toward the circle. From the corner of her eye, Mrs. Milford saw him. Her hand flailed out, catching the arm of one of the ladies. Theo slowed, then watched, as, one by one, the women turned from him, giving him their backs and closing their ranks.

The whole group had given him the cut direct. In a very public setting. Damn. The ton would be buzzing about this tomorrow.

Breathing out through his teeth, he stopped in his tracks. He could shoulder into the group to speak to Mrs. Milford, but that would only result in more gossip, and who knew how these ladies might interpret Miss Milford's dress being shredded "to ribbons" in his depraved presence.

He'd have to handle this on his own.

He swiveled away from the group and hurried to Hyde Park Corner, where his own carriage was parked, and roused his coachman, who'd been napping under his cap. "Ned, I need to assist a friend in distress. Please drive down Rotten Row and stop the carriage when I signal to you, then drive her home."

"Aye, sir."

A few minutes later, he knocked on the carriage's ceiling to let Ned know to stop. He slipped out of the vehicle and walked toward Charlotte and Miss Milford, whose back was pressed against the wide trunk of a walnut tree.

They both looked up as he approached, frowning when they saw he was alone.

"Where is my mother?" Miss Milford asked.

He ground his teeth. "I know you're disappointed to lay eyes

on me yet again, Miss Milford, but there's no need to sound so petulant about it."

She gasped. "How dare you call me pet—"

"I approached your mother as requested, but alas. She gave me the cut direct."

He saw the wince cross over her face, though she hid it expertly. "I see. I suppose I might have anticipated that."

"A warning might have saved me some measure of embarrassment," he said drily.

"Why on earth would she—" Charlotte began, then stopped, glancing between him and Miss Milford, who looked as tight-lipped as he no doubt did. "Never mind." She rose and brushed off her skirts. "I'll go speak with her. Will you wait here with Miss Milford, Ridge?"

With another, much louder, gasp, Miss Milford grabbed Charlotte's arm, much in the same way her mother had grasped the arm of the woman standing beside her. "Charlotte, no, you mustn't! Someone will see us alone together. They'll think—"

Good God, the chit was terrified at the thought of being alone with the Duke of Despots.

He blew out an annoyed breath. "Calm yourself, Miss Milford. I wouldn't want you to suffer from an apoplexy—or the lashing tongues of the gossips—on my behalf." He gestured toward his carriage. "My carriage is just over there."

Her eyes widened. "Your *carriage*? I would *never*—"

He cut her off before she could accuse him of attempted debauchery. "My driver will return you home."

Miss Milford gulped, then turned to Charlotte, her expression pleading for rescue.

Was he really that terrible?

Charlotte took Miss Milford's hand and squeezed it soothingly. "Don't worry, Georgiana—I'll accompany you home." She turned to Theo. "I'll return, but in the interim, will

you find Finn and tell him what happened? Ask him to inform Mrs. Milford where Georgiana has gone. He's conversing with a gardener beyond the clump of bushes near to where Mrs. Milford and her friends are."

"Of course. My coachman will return you here after you deposit Miss Milford at her house."

"Thank you, Ridge. This is very kind of you."

He waved his hand dismissively. "Think nothing of it."

Miss Milford did not thank him. She gazed at him with narrowed eyes until Charlotte led her away.

Good riddance, Theo thought.

Still, he watched her hurry, side by side with Charlotte, wincing when he saw two long tears down the back of her skirt—her dress really was in tatters. Just before she disappeared into his carriage, she glanced back over her shoulder at him, the provoking blond curl at her ear swinging with the motion. The disdain was still present, but there was something else that lit her expression. A flare of interest, perhaps?

Something hot burned within him in response. But then the coachman blocked his view as he leaned in so she could tell him the location of her house, and darker thoughts welled up in Theo: His life, his responsibilities, and the bleak endeavor of repairing what his father had ruined.

He shouldn't be thinking of how delectable it would be to tame a certain beautiful, spoiled, and disagreeable shrew.

But he had a sudden premonition that would not be the last time that particular temptation beckoned.

...

He avoided Mrs. Milford by straying off the path and keeping himself veiled behind bushes, and once he passed the area where the ladies were still gossiping loudly amongst themselves, he found the Earl of Trevelyan. The earl was talking to a groundskeeper, a dirt-smudged man holding a rake

and speaking to Trevelyan as casually as if they were close friends. Theo laughed to himself as he approached the two men. It was so like the earl, in this place teeming with members of the upper echelons of society, to prefer the company of a gardener.

When Trevelyan saw Theo, his face lit up. “Ridge! I didn’t know you were in town.”

It was damn good to see Trevelyan—they’d been friends since they were boys at Westminster School, getting into an assortment of scrapes and general trouble—and he hadn’t seen the man for nearly half a year. “I just arrived yesterday. I was going to send you and the countess a note, but”—he held out his hands—“here you are.”

Trevelyan spoke to the gardener for a few more minutes, and the men promised to meet again for further discussion of... What was it? Tree beetles? As the gardener walked away to resume his raking, Trevelyan turned to him. “It’s good to see you. Did you, by chance, encounter Charlotte on the footpath?”

“I did. She sent me here to let you know that she’s attending to Miss Milford, who’s suffered an unfortunate wardrobe catastrophe. They are using my carriage to take Miss Milford home, then Charlotte will return.”

“What happened?”

“It was my fault, I suppose.” Theo sank down onto a nearby stone bench, and Trevelyan sat beside him. “I encountered them on the path and startled Miss Milford into a bush, confirming that, without a doubt, thorns and muslin make poor bedfellows.”

Trevelyan nodded. “Ah.”

“I’m told you’re acquainted with the lady’s mother?”

“I am,” Trevelyan said.

Theo relayed Charlotte’s request for him to inform Mrs. Milford of her daughter’s accident. “But, for God’s sake,” Theo finished, “please do not tell her about my involvement!”

Trevelyan raised a brow but didn't ask questions. He nodded and left, returning a few minutes later. "Done. The poor lady was appalled. She's rushing home straightaway to ensure her daughter came to no harm during her ordeal."

Theo rolled his eyes as Trevelyan took a seat beside him. The earl sighed. "Suppose I'll just wait for Charlotte to return, then."

"I'll wait with you," Theo said.

"So, why *are* you back in London?" Trevelyan asked him. "I didn't expect to see you at all this summer."

Theo thought about how he'd left Bedfordshire—that desperate, undeniable urge to escape. But he didn't share that and instead revealed the secondary reason he'd come. "Sebastian."

That was all he had to say. He only needed to invoke his younger brother's name and Trevelyan would understand.

Trevelyan cocked a brow. "What has he done now?"

"He's amassed a small fortune in gambling debt. Not only that, he was arrested for drunkenness and disorderly behavior last week." Theo closed his eyes in a long blink as the refrain that constantly played in his mind blared, *It's your fault! You did this to him!*

Trevelyan gave a sympathetic groan. "I'm sorry, man."

"I'm here to pay his debts, even though I'm sorely inclined to let him face the consequences." As much as common sense told him that was what he should do, he wouldn't. He'd save Sebastian again like he had a half dozen times in the past. It *was* his fault that Sebastian had turned into the disaster of a man he was. Theo had run from the wolves and saved himself, but in the process, he'd abandoned everything and everyone in Bedfordshire without a second glance. Including his brother.

He swallowed hard. "Once I do that—" He shrugged. "Back to Clairwood Park, I suppose."

He had to go back. God knew he didn't want to, but he would.

Eventually.

“You don’t seem thrilled about the prospect,” Trevelyan said.

“I’m not.”

Trevelyan gave him a questioning look, and Theo tilted his head up to gaze at a cloud floating past. “They don’t want me there. As much as I’ve tried to erase the legacy my father left, I can’t seem to. The servants walk on tenterhooks. They’re so beaten down and afraid, it seems no matter what I do, I can’t make them treat me with anything besides obsequiousness. The tenants openly loathe me. The villagers in Bromford won’t speak to me or look me in the eye. It’s...” He hesitated, thinking of all the words to describe it. There were so many. Heartbreaking. Miserable. Depressing. Painful. “Exhausting,” he finished.

“I can’t imagine,” Trevelyan said softly. Of course he couldn’t. Trevelyan was much-loved. His servants, tenants, and the villagers near Crag End looked upon him with nothing short of adulation.

It must be nice. Theo would never know.

He groaned softly. “Did you know my father decorated and then named all the bedrooms after his mistresses? In a disgustingly alliterative but certainly not kindly way. There’s Screeching Sally’s Shithole. Busty Betsy’s Boudoir. Fancy Franny’s Fuck-Nest...” He swallowed. “I could go on. He refused to allow the servants to call those rooms by any other names. It’s repulsive.”

And Sebastian, four years his junior, had lived full-time in that place, while Theo had been sent away to school and had industriously avoided Clairwood Park until his father had died last year.

“You need a respite from all of it,” Trevelyan said.

“I do,” Theo said on a low groan.

“Come to Derbyshire with me.”

Theo rolled his head to face his friend. “What’s in Derbyshire?”

“Merrick’s house party. Charlotte wanted to go, and...”

When Trevelyan’s voice dwindled, Theo gave a low laugh. “...and you cannot deny her anything.”

“True,” Trevelyan said easily. “But what say you? A few weeks in the country, a safe distance from the responsibilities that weigh so heavily on your shoulders?”

He hesitated. He needed to do something about Sebastian. What, he had no idea. He also needed to fix the situation at Clairwood Park—but after ten months, how to do that was still beyond him.

He was failing. At all of it.

The temptation to avoid the nightmare awaiting him in Bedfordshire was strong.

Trevelyan leaned forward. “You know... Merrick also inherited an estate in ruins. You should see it now. He’s managed to restore it to its former glory and more. And, given a few days together, perhaps you and I will be able to conjure some solid ideas both for the estate and for Sebastian.”

The truth was, Theo hadn’t asked anyone for help—he’d just dived into his new life as the Duke of Desborough. He’d been isolated and alone for the past months. It would be nice to talk things through with his best friend and other like-minded men. Maybe doing so would give him perspective. Maybe it would motivate him to persist in this seemingly impossible endeavor.

“I admit I am tempted.”

He frowned... Hadn’t he heard those exact same words recently? But for the life of him, he couldn’t remember where.

Chapter Three

Two weeks later, Georgiana and her maid, Anne, descended the carriage at Lord and Lady Merrick's country house, Elder Abbey. The place was not named for any elders that might reside there—none did—but rather for the elder trees that lined the edge of the property and separated the forest from the moor. The trees were full and green, and even though it was late in the season for their blooms, clumps of tiny white elderflowers still hung heavy on some of the branches, releasing their sweet honey-like scent into the country air.

The house itself was an enormous rectangular stone structure built in the last century, with three stories, the top two of which boasted rows of stately windows.

Georgiana was handed out by a very proper-looking footman wearing a powdered wig, and she stepped forward to join the Earl and Countess of Trevelyan, who were descending from the carriage that had stopped in front of hers.

Charlotte introduced her to Lady Merrick, who took her hands in her own, her round face radiant with a welcoming smile. "I'm so glad you were able to join us!" As they walked up the stairs leading to the large entry hall, she said, "You must be exhausted from your journey. Mrs. Smith will show you to your rooms, and when you are ready, come join us for some refreshments in the conservatory. It is easy to find—just descend the stairs, turn right, and proceed all the way to the back of the house."

The housekeeper led them all upstairs and showed Georgiana her room, which was across the corridor from Charlotte and Lord Trevelyan's. It was a small but comfortably appointed bedchamber, with a counterpane embroidered with daisies, matching bedcurtains, and bright yellow curtains tied back from the window.

"How lovely," Georgiana told Mrs. Smith. "Thank you."

The housekeeper bobbed a curtsy and closed the door gently behind her. Georgiana freshened up, washing her face and

changing out of her traveling clothes with Anne's help. When she was dressed in a fresh white muslin day dress with a blooming wisteria vine embroidered down the side to provide a splash of color, she slid on a pair of sturdy shoes in case they ventured outside this afternoon, dabbed a bit of rosewater onto her temples and wrists, and left Anne to unpack the remainder of her luggage.

As she stepped into the corridor, she glanced at Charlotte and the earl's door. It was firmly shut—either they weren't ready or had already gone downstairs. Georgiana didn't need to wait. She was three steps down the stairs when she heard the sound of a door closing behind her. She looked over her shoulder with a grin on her face, expecting Charlotte.

It wasn't Charlotte. Her grin melted away.

Emerging from the room directly adjacent to hers was...

Not him. Anyone but him.

It was the Duke of Desborough.

She froze. "*You.*" She didn't realize she'd actually spoken the word until his head jerked up and he saw her.

He froze, too, a frown line appearing between his brows. "*You,*" he said.

She ground her teeth. "What are *you* doing here?" She knew she was being rude, but she couldn't help it. Other than the fortune hunters, she generally liked people, enjoyed talking to them, getting to know them, but this one...*no*. He was a bad seed of a bad family. Her father always said the world would be a better place without the St. Clairs, and by all accounts, he was right.

She couldn't understand why Charlotte seemed to like him so much. He was unworthy of a second glance.

The problem was, when he was near, Georgiana couldn't seem to stop looking.

He was handsome. Infuriatingly so. No one that despicable had a right to be so attractive. Tall and dark, but with those striking blue eyes... He was attired in striped trousers, a richly

embroidered gold waistcoat, a crisp white cravat, and a tailcoat that fit him perfectly from broad shoulders to narrow waist. She'd never seen him dressed in anything less than fashionable perfection.

He arched an arrogant, perfect dark brow that made her despise him even more, if possible. "I could ask the same of you, Miss Milford."

"I was invited."

"So was I."

"And yet, you were not on the list of attendees." She'd seen it—her parents had studied it carefully before allowing Georgiana to go. They'd easily agreed—everyone on the list was a paragon of society. There were only two unmarried men planning to attend the party, one a viscount, one a prominent gentleman of fortune, both of whom her mother would be in raptures over her marrying.

His brow crept higher. "Nor were you."

He had her there. "Charlotte—Lady Trevelyan—invited me."

He was on the top step now, looking down at her with a cool sneer. "Well, isn't that interesting. *Lord* Trevelyan invited me."

"Interesting indeed," she said tightly. She couldn't blame Charlotte or her husband for this. She'd never shared her dislike of the duke with her friend. There had been no reason to. She was no gossip.

"Were you heading to the conservatory?"

"I was," she said.

"As was I."

She didn't move as he descended the steps toward her. She looked down to see her arms crossed defensively over her chest. What was it he'd called her at Hyde Park last month? *Petulant*. She clenched her fists and dropped her arms.

He stopped beside her on the step she was on, and she inhaled the fresh, piney smell of rosemary mixed with the spicy notes of cloves. "Shall we?"

He offered his arm.

She stared at it, unable to think of anything to say that wouldn't sound petulant, so she laid her hand lightly on his arm. They walked the rest of the way downstairs side by side, neither of them speaking.

As they turned down the passageway that led to the back of the house, she asked, "How long do you intend to stay?"

"Until Trevelyan leaves."

She blew out a harsh breath. He would be here for the entire time she would be. She was leaving a few days earlier than Lord Trevelyan and Charlotte to join her parents in Southampton so the three of them could meet Lizzie's ship when it arrived.

He stopped midstep and gave her a look she could only describe as condescending. "You needn't be frightened of me, Miss Milford."

That raised her hackles. She let go of his arm and stepped back from him. "*Me?* Frightened of *you?* I don't think so, sir."

"Clearly you were terrified of me at Hyde Park. Trembling from head to foot, if I am remembering properly."

She gave a mocking laugh. "You mistake rage for fear, Your Grace."

He frowned. "Rage? Why were you enraged?"

"At your audacity!"

"My *audacity?*"

"To believe I would agree to sit with you—alone—in full view of all the carriages and people promenading in the park. Or, worse, ride in your carriage with you."

"It was Lady Trevelyan's idea that I sit with you," he said, his eyes mocking her, "not mine."

She shrugged.

"And, yes. I wanted you to take my carriage to save you from wagging tongues, not because I intended to have my

wicked way with you.”

It took her an extended moment to thrust aside the image of what him having his “wicked way” with her might entail. Then, she cleared her throat. “Save me? What do you think you could possibly save me from?”

“Gossip,” he shot back. “Scandal. If you had returned to your mother with your dress in tatters, there would have been no avoiding it. It was the only solution I could think of at that moment. And my plan ultimately worked. It *saved* you.”

Damn him. She scowled at him.

“Am I wrong?”

“You are pompous and arrogant and...” She shook her head, unable to think of anything to add that wouldn’t make him even more pompous and arrogant. “...and I wish to have nothing to do with you,” she finished.

He shrugged, not caring at all that she despised him. “Then don’t,” he said flatly.

“I won’t.”

“Very well.” His tone was light, but his eyes were hard as stones.

“Fine.”

“Good.”

She gave a sharp nod, then turned and, blood pumping in a hot, vicious wave through her, stalked the few steps toward the door that must lead to the conservatory. She threw it open to a room containing a group of people milling around between rows of thick greenery. All eyes turned to her, then up slightly to take in the duke, whose heat she could feel just behind her.

“Oh, lovely,” Lady Merrick exclaimed as she emerged from the group. “I see you two know each other.”

“Indeed,” Desborough said mildly as they walked into a room made entirely of glass. “In fact, Miss Milford’s father’s estate borders mine. We’re neighbors.”

Though Charlotte and Lord Trevelyan hadn’t yet come

downstairs, Lady Merrick rushed around, making introductions and ensuring everyone had whatever refreshment they desired. Georgiana met Lord Merrick, a young man who'd already lost most of his hair, his scalp showing pink through the thin strands he'd combed over it. He welcomed her kindly.

Then there was Viscount Hawkins, a tall, handsome man with light-brown hair that flopped over his brow, who gave her a solicitous bow and told her how wonderful it was to meet her. And Mr. Worthington, the dark-haired banker who was nearly as rich as her father.

She'd keep her distance from those two. Hawkins was already regarding her with predatory hawk eyes, and Worthington—well, rich men enjoyed nothing more than growing richer, didn't they?

Lady Merrick's younger sister, Miss Evelyn Roundtree, and Miss Roundtree's friend, Miss Hannah Kendall, rounded out the gathered guests—and rounded out the entire company, she learned.

At the wrought-iron table placed in the center of two long rows of plants blooming in vibrant colors, Georgiana sat beside Miss Roundtree and took a glass of lemonade from the tray being passed around. Lord and Lady Merrick began to discuss the plans for the next fortnight. There were ten people in attendance, and the Merricks had arranged for them to spend the next two weeks engaging in the delights of the High Peak. In the daytime, they'd tour the countryside, play outdoor games, hunt, and fish, and in the evenings, there would be parlor games, card games, music, and dancing.

All in all, it sounded lovely.

It *would* be lovely if Georgiana didn't feel the burning blue eyes of the Duke of Desborough on her during the entire conversation. His gaze made her feel hot and unsettled. Right and wrong at the same time. It was maddening, but also, if Georgiana were to be honest with herself, exciting.

And that was dangerous.

Lord knew, if her parents found out that the Duke of Desborough was attending this house party, they'd be horrified. They'd ride out here personally to drag her away.

She should leave. She *would* leave. She'd tell Charlotte as soon as she could get her friend alone.

Chapter Four

“I should go.”

Late that night, Theo paced from one end of the long salon to the other. As he reached Trevelyan, who was lounging on a divan, he crossed his arms over his chest. “She hates me.”

“I honestly can’t imagine Miss Milford hating anyone,” Trevelyan said. “She’s so...pleasant.”

Theo snorted. “Have you met the woman?”

“Several times,” the earl said. “She’s delightful. Far more authentic than most people of the ton.”

Authentically repulsed by me, Theo thought. He sat down wearily next to his friend. “You don’t understand. I came here to get away from Bedfordshire. Everyone there feels that kind of revulsion to me, though they show it in different ways. It”—he pulled in a long breath—“well, as I said before, it’s exhausting. And now it feels as if Bedfordshire has followed me here.”

“Can’t you merely avoid her company?”

Theo frowned. That would be difficult. There were only ten people in attendance. They couldn’t entirely avoid each other. But the Merricks had provided alternate activities every day. Surely, a spoiled heiress wouldn’t share any interests with him. “I could try, I suppose.”

“What other option do you have?” Trevelyan said. “Return to Bedfordshire and all the aggravation that would entail? That sounds far less enticing. And...” He sat a little straighter, his eyes lighting with an idea. “You might be able to use this as an opportunity.”

Theo gave him a suspicious look. “For what?”

“For beginning to ingratiate yourself to your tenants, servants, and neighbors. You’re not your father, Ridge. It’s been almost a year, and everyone still believes you’re just like him. You and I both know damn well you’re not. Perhaps you

just need to learn how to change a person's mind about you. Win Georgiana over, and the rest will follow."

Theo stiffened. "I cannot fathom how it would ever be possible to change Georgiana Milford's mind about me. The level of animosity her family harbors toward mine exceeds what I thought possible. Honestly, I don't understand it. I know my father was obnoxious and a poor neighbor. I believe he began the feud by proclaiming Milford was nothing more than a social climber trying to pilfer proper aristocrats' lands and wealth." He heaved a sigh. "But one would think the Milfords have witnessed the fallow fields bordering their lands turning green again. They'd see that the lawn is being cut, I've had the fences repaired, provided the funds to recobble the high street in the village..." He shook his head. "But no. They give me the cut direct in public, and worse, they gaze upon me as if I'm the devil himself."

"Well," Trevelyan said mildly, "I didn't say it would be easy, did I?"

"You also don't seem to understand that it will be impossible."

"Oh, I don't think so. Miss Milford doesn't strike me as unreasonable. Once she gets to know you, you'll win her over."

"I believe you are overconfident in my abilities, Trev," Theo grumbled. "I think I prefer the avoidance strategy over this one."

"Fine," Trevelyan said. "Avoid her, then. But I'd really prefer you to stay. Without you, this..."

His voice dwindled, but Theo understood. Trevelyan didn't have many friends, and Theo was lucky to count himself as one of them—probably the *only* one of their class. If he stayed, he'd help his friend endure this party—maybe even help him to make a few more friends. Plus, if he stayed, Trevelyan had promised to help him with his various challenges in Bedfordshire...and with Sebastian.

Most important, staying here would mean he wouldn't have

to return to Clairwood Park, at least not yet.

Familiar guilt suffused him. He had run away...again. But, he reasoned, at least this time the end result would be beneficial.

He gave a long-suffering sigh. "Very well. But if this becomes a problem, I'm leaving."

Trevelyan tilted his head. "I'd expect no less."

...

"I should go." Georgiana clasped her hands tightly in her lap. It was past midnight, and she and Charlotte were in her little bedchamber, sitting side by side on the edge of the bed.

"I honestly can't understand why," Charlotte said.

"Because..." Georgiana hesitated, then decided it was time to tell Charlotte exactly what she thought of the earl's bosom friend. "I'm sorry to say this, Charlotte, because I know you like him. But I find the Duke of Desborough completely insufferable."

Charlotte's brow furrowed. "What? Why on earth would you say that?"

"His family and mine...well, ever since my father bought Norton House before I was born, they have been not only rivals but, dare I say, enemies. In fact, our fathers despised each other to the extent that I'm honestly grateful that they didn't end up killing each other before the duke passed."

"Why?"

"Because the St. Clairs have been, and I say this quite literally, a scourge on the land. Not only their own land but the surrounding area as well. It has been so awful that my father has had to step in and save several families in the community."

"Save them? From what?"

"Ill treatment," Georgiana said, feeling slightly sick to her stomach. "Starvation. Homelessness."

"That's terrible." Charlotte's frown deepened. "I suppose this

explains why your mother gave the duke the cut direct at Hyde Park.”

Georgiana nodded. “It is exactly why. My mother can’t abide the sight of any of the St. Clairs. Honestly, I’m relieved she didn’t faint dead away at the sight of him.”

“Yet you didn’t stop him when I asked him to go fetch her,” Charlotte chided.

Georgiana flinched. “I didn’t. I should have. I’m sorry. I didn’t think about how she’d react to his approaching her. I was...so worried that someone might see the state of my dress.”

More like she was worried about the prickling over her skin—not from the thorns but from the heat flushing through her at the duke’s proximity.

“Of course you were.” Charlotte’s voice lost all trace of disapproval. “Honestly, I don’t know much about Ridge’s father, but I’ve known Ridge since I was a girl. He was a good friend of my brother’s and has been a wonderful friend to Finn for many years.”

That made absolutely no sense given what Georgiana knew of him. The pompous Duke of Despots and the kindly earl of the people seemed about as unlikely a friendship match as there ever could be. She sighed. “The fact is, he’s here, and it seems clear to me that he dislikes me as much as I dislike him.”

“What makes you think he dislikes you?”

“You saw how he spoke to me at Hyde Park. He was dripping with sarcasm and disdain.”

Charlotte frowned. “That is just his outward demeanor in the company of those he doesn’t know well. It is only a pretense of indifference, though. If you grew to know him as I do, I’m sure you’d like him immensely.”

Georgiana snorted. “That seems quite a stretch.”

“Well, maybe not *like* him. Maybe you could learn to tolerate him.”

“I don’t know,” Georgiana said doubtfully.

Charlotte took her hand and squeezed it tightly. “*Please* stay.”

Georgiana chewed on her lower lip. “I shouldn’t. If my parents knew of his presence here, they’d be horrified. They’d order me home without delay.”

Charlotte shrugged. “Then don’t tell them.”

That took Georgiana aback for a second. She told her parents everything. They trusted her in return, though earning enough trust from her father to become as deeply involved in his business dealings as she had taken many years.

This, though, had nothing to do with her father’s business. The truth was, what her parents didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them.

None of the house party’s events were mandatory. So when being involved with an activity would put her in close contact with the duke, she could excuse herself from it.

Easy.

“I suppose I could try to avoid him.”

Charlotte nodded. “You could.”

“But people gossip, and if my parents find out that Desborough is here, they’ll be horrified. If that happens, you must let them know you served as a buffer between the two of us.”

“Of course,” Charlotte said agreeably.

“And I don’t mean that you should lie to them. I honestly do need you to be a buffer between us. I’m sorry, Charlotte, but I really would like to avoid any further confrontations with the man.”

“I understand.” Charlotte squeezed Georgiana’s hand reassuringly. “I promise I’ll do my best.”

Chapter Five

Late the next morning, Georgiana entered the breakfast room to find everyone except Charlotte and the Duke of Desborough already seated. After saying good morning, she fetched her breakfast from the sidebar and selected a chair near Miss Kendall and Miss Roundtree.

“Miss Milford, I love your dress. It is *so* pretty.” Miss Kendall had sleek, dark hair and brown eyes, while Miss Roundtree looked like her sister, Lady Merrick, with a full face, a splash of freckles over her nose, blue eyes, and strawberry-blond hair.

“Why, thank you, Miss Kendall,” Georgiana said. “I designed it myself.”

Just then, Desborough walked in with Charlotte on his arm. He grinned when he saw they were the last to arrive. “Charlotte and I appear to be the two of the group who enjoy sleeping in.”

“You must feel free to sleep in as late as you like every day when you are at my house,” Lady Merrick declared graciously.

He nodded at her. “Thank you, my lady. I will.”

“As will I.” Charlotte’s smile lit the room as she squeezed the duke’s arm. “We do enjoy our rest, don’t we, Ridge?”

“Indeed we do.”

He and Charlotte sat down at the other end of the table next to Lord Trevelyan, who handed each of them a section of the *Times*.

“Your dinner dress last night was stunning, as well, Miss Milford,” Miss Kendall said, and Georgiana turned back to the two younger ladies and their earlier conversation.

“Thank you. Fashion is my passion.” They all smiled at the rhyme.

“Tell me how you make your choices,” Miss Roundtree said. “Everything you’ve worn has been at the very pinnacle of the

current trends.”

“My favorite resource lately is *Le Journal des Dames et des Modes*. I know it is French and difficult to find right now because of the war, but”—she shrugged—“my father found a way to obtain it for me.”

Could you *hear* a person rolling their eyes? Because she was certain she just had. The Duke of Desborough was mocking her from across the table. She bit back her own eye roll. He—the man who was probably sewn into his deep-blue morning coat—was hardly one to talk. He probably had his clothing ensembles lifted from the pages of the French fashion magazines before they were printed.

“Oh, how lucky you are!” Miss Roundtree said. “I haven’t been able to read an issue of *Le Journal* for *years*.”

“I’ll send you my copies when I finish with them if you’d like.”

“Oh, yes, please! Thank you so much.”

Georgiana risked a glance at the duke, but he was gazing down at his newspaper.

Goodness. She was overreacting to nothing now. He probably hadn’t even heard her.

She started buttering her toast as Miss Roundtree mused, “Have you noticed that just about everything fashionable is white now? Morning dresses, day dresses, ballgowns...white, white, and more white.”

“I have,” Miss Kendall said. “It makes me wonder if it will forevermore be vulgar to wear any sort of color at all.”

“It is still stylish to wear darker clothing in the outdoors,” Georgiana pointed out.

“That’s true,” Miss Roundtree said. “In fact, my riding costume is the only dark-colored garment, besides my coat, that I brought to the party.”

“I’m sure colors will return to fashion at some point,” Georgiana said. “In the meantime, I try to experiment with ways to make my clothing distinct and original. And I still find

ways to add color, whether it's a splash of green and blue like the embroidery on my day dress yesterday, with my accessories, or by using 'almost-whites'—very pale colors or creams or whites shot through with silver or gold thread for evening wear.”

Grinning, Miss Kendall tapped her chin. “I like how you think, Miss Milford.”

Lady Merrick clinked her fork on her silver egg cup. “Attention, everyone—I wanted to let you know that after we finish here, we are headed outdoors for a game of lawn bowls. There will also be several diversions indoors, if you'd prefer—music and games and the like. We have a dealer from London in our card room. We're having a picnic luncheon on the lawn and a walk across the Hope Valley Ridge this afternoon; then, this evening, we'll continue with parlor games in the drawing room. For now, take your time and enjoy your breakfast.”

The room buzzed with excitement. “I think I shall stay in,” Miss Roundtree said. “It seems every time I step outside after ten in the morning or before six in the evening, I end up with a dozen more freckles. I might go outside for a spell for the picnic, but believe me, if I do, I'll be wearing a bonnet with an extremely large brim!”

“I'll stay with you,” Miss Kendall said. “We were up so late last night, a day of relaxation sounds perfect. What will you do, Miss Milford?”

Georgiana sipped her tea, considering. Lady Merrick had said there was a dealer from London for card games. The St. Clairs were known for their obsession with the gaming tables, so she was certain the duke would while away the afternoon playing hazard or whist or whatever other games idle nobs played.

“Lawn bowls sounds appealing,” she murmured. “It's a lovely day.”

Leaning toward Georgiana, Miss Roundtree whispered, “Beware—my sister is violently competitive. And she's good at bowls.”

“Is she?” Georgiana’s voice was mild. But inwardly, she was greedily rubbing her hands together.

She enjoyed nothing more than a bit of friendly competition.

...

An hour later, Theo walked out of his room. And who should be opening her door at the exact same time? Of course, it was *her*. Why the hell had Lady Merrick assigned them rooms right next to each other? Luck was never on his side lately.

She went rigid when she saw him. He bowed tightly. “Miss Milford.”

“Your Grace,” she responded, equally tight.

She was wearing a stylish hat with a large brim, which meant... Theo released a stream of expletives in his head. She was going outside. He had been convinced that she’d choose to remain indoors. She was rather pale—he’d thought that must certainly mean outdoor enjoyments didn’t appeal to her. He’d heard the ladies at her end of the table talking about how they wanted to remain indoors due to freckles, which he couldn’t fathom, but then again, he couldn’t fathom many choices ladies of his class made.

He’d already told Trevelyan and Charlotte he’d join them outside. He’d thought that was the safe choice. But no. Clearly, this was going to be perilous.

“You chose bowls, then?” he inquired, trying like hell to make his voice sound distantly polite as they began the excruciating descent down the stairs.

“I did.” She cocked an imperious brow at him. “And you? The gaming table, I suspect.”

Hell no. That would have been his last choice. He knew too well of the perils of the gaming tables, even at a seemingly innocent setting like Elder Abbey. He would not bet on anything, ever. He’d paid a thousand pounds to his brother’s creditors just last week.

Still, he bristled at the disapproval in her voice.

Be. Polite.

“No,” he simply said. “Not the gaming table.”

He kept stride with her as they entered the conservatory and walked through the verdant space out onto the vast lawn leading away from the house. She grew stiffer with every step, if that were possible.

“I see,” she finally said. “Lawn bowls for you, too, then.” It sounded like she was speaking through her teeth.

“It appears we have both chosen the outdoors.”

Charlotte, who’d been conversing with a small group of people, looked up as they approached the green, then physically inserted herself between Theo and Miss Milford and took her friend’s arm. “I thought you’d choose to stay inside, Georgiana. I’m so glad you decided to join us.”

Miss Milford frowned. “It seems everyone assumed I’d remain indoors. But why would I?” She looked up at the jewel-blue sky. “It’s a lovely day. And playing bowls is *fun*.”

“I heartily agree, Miss Milford,” Lady Merrick said. “And, as my sister and Miss Kendall are staying inside, everyone is here. Since we have a group of eight, I will create four teams of two people each. We’ll play separate games, and the winners will play against one another for the championship.”

Everyone nodded, and Lady Merrick studied the group. “Lord Trevelyan—you look like a sporting fellow, and I wish to win, so you shall be my partner.” Beaming, she wrapped her arm around Trevelyan’s. “Lady Trevelyan will play with Merrick, His Grace with Miss Milford—”

Oh damn. The woman had just paired Theo with Miss Milford. Theo cut a glance at her to see her lips tight, her jaw working.

“—and that will leave you two.” Lady Merrick gestured toward Viscount Hawkins and Mr. Worthington.

For a moment, Theo wondered if Miss Milford would object outright to being paired with him. But then she nodded in acceptance, and from the corner of his eye, he saw Charlotte

wince with sympathy for her friend.

Tension radiated through his shoulders. He'd make the best of this, damn it.

He thought of what Trevelyan had suggested: *win her over*. He supposed this would be a perfect opportunity to prove the inevitable futility of that endeavor.

“Does everyone know how to play?” Lady Merrick asked. Charlotte and Worthington didn't, so she explained. “It's simple.” She held up a small white ball. “This is the jack. You will receive four larger balls, your bowls. Someone will roll the jack onto the lane, and the object is to roll your bowls closer to the jack than your opponents do.” She grinned. “There are a few more subtle details, but they're best learned during the play.”

They chose their lanes, and Theo took the jack Milford handed to him.

“Oh, I see how it is,” Miss Milford said instantly. “You seized the jack straightaway because you believe I'll botch the throw.”

He turned to her with a scowl. “Why would I think that?”

“Because I am a woman who you assumed would prefer to stay indoors rather than partake in an outdoor game.”

He released a breath through his teeth. “I was just about to offer it to you, but if you'd rather I throw it instead—”

“No!” She snatched it from him.

He crossed his arms over his chest and watched her as she readjusted the mat and stood on it. She held the ball to her chest and stared out over the green, a frown carving a line between her brows. Then she took a step forward and delivered the jack.

After watching it roll to a stop, Miss Milford nodded with satisfaction. They all headed to a table that held an assortment of bowls. Theo grabbed four of the larger balls and used a piece of chalk to mark his initials on them.

Miss Milford, however, took several minutes at the table,

lifting each ball, studying it with a critical eye, and taking a couple of practice bowls with it before claiming four of them and carefully setting them aside.

As she was to go first, she retrieved a bowl and went to the mat. She stood tall, studying the jack. Theo could practically see the gears of strategy working in her mind. Then she took a lunging step forward and bowled.

It must be luck, Theo thought, because all four of her bowls came within two feet of the jack. Even though she was on the opposing team, Charlotte clapped in appreciation. “Well done, Georgiana!”

Charlotte bowled next as Lord Merrick came to stand beside Theo. “Day after tomorrow’s the Glorious Twelfth, Desborough,” he said. “You know what that means.”

Theo shook himself out of his preoccupation with Miss Milford. Of course. The twelfth of August was the official beginning of— “Grouse season?”

“That’s right. I’ve made plans for us to go out at dawn. Interested?”

“Definitely,” Theo answered instantly. Now that was an event that Miss Milford—who stood nearby, hands on hips, watching Charlotte’s flailing attempts at bowling—certainly wouldn’t attend. “Looking forward to it.”

“Oh dear,” Charlotte said. “I fear this is not my game.” Theo glanced over to see all of her bowls had come to rest far from the jack—and far from all of Miss Milford’s bowls. “Your turn, Ridge.”

After bowling two ends, the group broke for a few minutes to have a drink of cold lemonade. The August sun was burning bright overhead, the temperature quickly rising.

Though the teams were tied in points so far, Miss Milford tugged him aside. He looked at her in surprise, but she snipped, “Lord Merrick is a skilled player. Focus, Desborough, or we’re going to lose this.”

He’d been focused solely on *her*. Clearly, he’d hidden it well. He laughed lightly. “I’m here to enjoy myself, not duel to

the death.”

That was, evidently, what she intended to do. Her concentration had been so intense, she hadn't said a word during the play.

She scowled. “Are you laughing at me?”

“Of course not,” he said. “Just at your pointless competitiveness.”

“I wouldn't call it pointless,” she huffed.

She smelled like a fresh rose. *Don't think about that right now.*

“It's just a game,” he said.

“One I wish to *win*.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, enjoying this more than he should. “That might not be possible. As you said, Merrick is skilled.”

“But Charlotte's lack of skill offsets his expertise,” she argued, her pretty hazel eyes looking green in the sunlight, snapping up at him from beneath the brim of her bonnet. “If you gave an ounce of effort, we could beat them.”

“You don't believe I've given an ounce of effort?” he challenged, trying not to stare at the pink flush blooming over the smooth lines of her cheeks.

“I'm hard-pressed to believe you've ever given an ounce of effort in anything,” she retorted.

He pressed a hand to his chest and pasted a distraught expression on his face. Bending down, he spoke softly into her ear. “You wound me, Georgiana.”

She jerked back, blinking, startled that he'd called her by her given name. “You...” she gasped. “You cannot... I didn't give you leave to call me that!”

“Forgive me,” he murmured. But they both knew he'd done it deliberately. There was something oddly gratifying about getting a rise out of her.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I’m also hard-pressed to believe you’re so easily wounded.”

“Is everything all right here?”

Theo looked up to see Charlotte hurrying toward them, holding a frosty glass of lemonade in her hand.

“Everything is perfect,” Theo said. “Miss Milford was just giving me a few tips on bowling technique.”

Charlotte turned to her friend. “You are very good at this game, Georgiana. Do you have your own bowling green at Norton House?”

“No,” Georgiana said. “I’ve played only a few times before.”

Now that was surprising.

“You seem to have a natural gift,” Charlotte said.

“Or perhaps it’s beginner’s luck,” Theo put in.

Georgiana shot him a glare. “Shall we go back?”

She had marched to the mat before either of them could answer. Theo followed, a smile tugging at the edges of his lips.

...

Georgiana and the duke won the first game by a large margin, which put them in the championship game against Lady Merrick and Lord Trevelyan.

To Georgiana’s annoyance, she and the duke fell behind right away, thanks to his lazy attitude. The man was infuriatingly carefree about the situation. After the fourth end, Lady Merrick gave a satisfied smirk. “It’s really not fair at all to those of you who don’t have a bowling green upon which to practice. I love this game. Merrick truly indulges me by paying for the license so we are allowed to maintain it.”

Georgiana had heard of the lawn bowling license—essentially a heavy tax upon those who kept bowling greens. It had begun over two hundred years ago and had something to do with Henry VIII wanting fewer people to play at bowls—which was useless in war—and more to practice archery,

which was a skill far more beneficial to his military aspirations. Those who still wished to have bowling greens had to maintain them on their own personal lands and pay the lofty fee for the license. Those of the lower classes were only allowed to play one day a year—Christmas Day—and only on their masters' lands.

A ridiculous, archaic law, as far as Georgiana was concerned.

Lord Merrick, who was standing to the side, grinned. "Remember my generosity, my dear, when I'm at Tattersall's next month!"

Just last night, Lady Merrick had been complaining of Merrick's passion for the horse races and how he spent a fortune on bloodstock at Tattersall's. Lady Merrick cast a fond smile in her husband's direction. "I'll try."

Georgiana had hardly been able to look at the Duke of Desborough all morning. His mere presence was enough to make her feel flustered and out of sorts, and whenever she *actually* turned her gaze to him...

Ugh. It was incomprehensible. Even as his dismissive attitude infuriated her, every move he made, every flex of the muscles beneath his exquisitely tailored clothing, made her heart race, made the little hairs on the back of her neck prickle with awareness.

Worse, when she risked a glance in his direction, she often found him looking at her, a most exasperating smirk curling his lips and a sparkle of humor in those clear blue eyes. It was like he knew exactly how he affected her and took great satisfaction from it.

She wanted nothing more than to wipe that annoyingly smug expression from his face.

And now it was his turn, but instead of taking it, he stood to the side as Lord Merrick regaled him with the details of his latest acquisition from Tattersall's.

Clearing her throat, she hefted one of her bowls and strode to the mat. "If you refuse to take your turn, I'll bowl for you, Your Grace."

Excusing himself from the conversation, Desborough moved to her side. “Impatient little minx,” he murmured in a low voice only she could hear before nudging her aside.

She gasped in indignation but then stepped away, pressing her lips together to withhold the stream of retorts wanting to flow out of her. If she spoke to him now, it would probably only make them fall further behind in the game.

He bowled four times—brilliantly—then raised a brow at her before returning to his conversation with Lord Merrick.

By the beginning of the twelfth end, she was frustrated. They’d caught up to Lady Merrick and Lord Trevelyan and fallen behind again. The duke *still* didn’t seem to care one way or another whether they won or lost.

But they were *so* close!

Georgiana hefted the bowl in her hands, staring down the jack before stepping forward and sending the bowl toward it.

Everyone watched in silence as it drew closer, slowed, and then came to a stop just touching the jack, closer than any of Lord Trevelyan’s bowls by a couple of feet.

She pumped her fist as everyone but the opposing team cheered at her brilliant attempt. Her next three bowls were also excellent, one of them pushing one of Lord Trevelyan’s bowls farther away before coming to rest a few inches from the jack.

She stepped back with a nod. She’d done what she could.

Desborough came to stand by her side. “Well done.”

“Thank you.”

They watched from a short distance as Lady Merrick bowled. All of her four attempts ended up in excellent positions, especially the final one, which somehow knocked away Georgiana’s bowl next to the jack and replaced it, settling beside the jack without moving it.

Georgiana groaned. Desborough gave her a conciliatory pat on the shoulder. “That’s that, then. We’ve lost.”

“No, we haven’t. You still haven’t taken your turn.”

The duke gave an exasperated sigh.

“You can do it,” she said. “You’ve had a few ends that have scored higher than you need to score to beat them.”

“Thank you for the encouragement,” he said drily.

“I’m serious. You can do it,” she repeated.

He assessed her with his gaze, then tilted his head. “And if I do?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you think I’d deserve an award?”

“Of course. The thrill of a victory well won will be our prize.”

“Hm. I was thinking of something else.”

She put her hands on her hips and looked at him skeptically. “Oh? Like what?”

Judging from the wicked spark in his eyes, he was going to propose something clichéd and tiresome. A kiss or some such nonsense. As if she’d agree to such a scheme!

Still, an unwelcome thrill ran through her. If he asked her for a kiss, what would happen if she *did* agree?

One innocent little kiss. A brush of lips. A tiny connection.

His lips... Lord, but they were kissable. Full and soft-looking—

No. Absolutely not. Never.

She hated the man, she reminded herself.

“Sit beside me at the picnic,” he said.

“An entire meal at your side?” she inquired, then shuddered, ensuring he could see it. “I’m not sure I could bear that.”

“Oh, I’m certain you could.”

She didn’t understand why on earth he’d want to sit beside her. Probably to mock her about her competitive nature. If they actually won, though, she could endure his nonsense...for a little while, at least.

She gave a short nod. “Fine.”

With a quicksilver grin, he walked away, picked up a bowl, and, seemingly without a care, sent it tumbling down the lane.

Close, Georgiana thought with dawning hope.

They all watched with bated breath as he made the next two attempts.

Georgiana couldn't tell whose bowls were nearer to the jack. But there was still that last one of Lady Merrick's, resting proudly against the little white ball.

Desborough hefted his fourth bowl, then looked over at Georgiana. “This one is for you, Miss Milford.”

Was that a wink? Had he *winked* at her?

He let the bowl loose, and everyone watched it roll down the lane. The whole party gasped when, with a satisfying *smack*, it knocked at the spot where Lady Merrick's bowl and the jack touched, separating them and then arcing to follow the jack to its final resting place while Lady Merrick's tumbled in the opposite direction.

Georgiana hurried to the duke's side, and they both watched as a servant rushed to measure the bowls' distances from the jack and tally the points. Finally, he looked up and called, “His Grace and Miss Milford score three points. They finish one point ahead of Lord Trevelyan and Lady Merrick.”

Georgiana jumped up with a cheer and threw her arms around the duke, who took a stumbling, surprised step back before going completely still. His eyes locked with hers, and sensation shivered through her as his arms banded around her. On their own accord, her arms tightened around him in return, a feeling of rightness humming through her.

And then reality barreled in. She quickly dropped her arms and lurched back, horror dawning as the heat of embarrassment burst over her skin.

What on earth had come over her? But she could not falter, nor would she show her regret at making such a frivolous, impulsive, even *scandalous* gesture. Straightening, she raised

her chin and stared everyone down, her cool gaze finally landing on him. “It appears we won, Your Grace,” she said crisply.

A slow, real smile—so different from his careless, sarcastic one—spread across his face and sent a warm glow into his eyes. “We did, Miss Milford. We did, indeed.”

Chapter Six

The picnic was set on an enormous blanket under the shade of an elder tree. As Georgiana walked across the lawn, Charlotte linked arms with her. “You’ll sit beside Finn and me, won’t you?”

Georgiana chewed her lip. “I can’t.”

Charlotte blinked. “Why not?”

“I promised the duke I’d sit with him.”

Charlotte tugged Georgiana to a stop. “What? Why?”

“I told him I’d sit beside him if we won at bowls.”

Charlotte looked confused. “He asked you to sit with him?”

“He did.” Georgiana tried to keep her voice light. Carefree.

“Did he say why?”

“Not exactly.” She stared at the ground, pretending to pick her way carefully over the grass so that Charlotte wouldn’t guess at the baffling attraction that swirled between her and the duke despite their mutual loathing.

“Well. That’s odd.”

Georgiana raised her gaze back to her friend. “Why do you say that?”

“Finn told me that he spoke with the duke last night. He was planning to leave to avoid a confrontation between the two of you. Finn only barely persuaded him to stay.”

“He was going to leave the party?” She frowned, struggling to decipher the strange emotion welling up within her. She wasn’t upset Lord Trevelyan had convinced the duke to stay. In fact, it was the opposite.

She tried to shake off the sensation. Those kinds of feelings were perilous. The Duke of Desborough was a dangerous man.

“Yes,” Charlotte said. “You both were planning to leave the party early. Seems the two of you are rather terrified of each

other.”

“Hardly.” Georgiana pulled her defenses tightly around her. “I was just trying to prevent the inevitable unfriendly encounters in the midst of a perfectly lovely house party.”

“As was he, it seems,” Charlotte murmured.

“Yet we’ve been encountering each other all day,” Georgiana said.

“I would have insisted Lady Merrick change the partners at bowling, but you were nodding your agreement, so—”

Georgiana waved her hand. “No, no, it would have been rude of me to publicly reject him as a partner. In the future, I’ll have to think of subtler avoidance tactics.”

“After you sit together at the picnic, of course.”

“If we *survive* the picnic.” She grimaced. “There is a possibility that we’ll murder each other on the blanket.”

Charlotte laughed. “That won’t happen. You were perfectly civil during the game.”

“Were we?” Georgiana had thought the sparks—of frustration, anger, annoyance...*desire*—flying between them must have been felt all the way to London.

She thought of his lips, then tamped down the tremor that radiated from her core.

Good Lord. She *desired* the Duke of Despots.

The man whose blasé attitude annoyed her to her wits’ end. Also the man her parents had named the spawn of evil. Her parents would not slur someone like that unless he deserved it.

She huffed out a breath. She needed to gather her wits and cling to them. They were flighty things, those wits of hers.

“You were both quite civil,” Charlotte assured her.

Well, that was a relief. At least she wasn’t broadcasting all her strange, conflicted feelings about the duke across England. That fact bolstered her resolve.

Then, Charlotte smiled. “Although you seemed rather intent

on winning, while Ridge didn't seem to care one way or another until that last end. It seems he really wanted to sit beside you."

Georgiana blew out a breath. "He wanted to continue to torture me, more like."

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps he'll be pleasant."

Georgiana opened her mouth to make a quip about how the duke was never pleasant, but then she shut it. Because it wouldn't be completely true. There were times in the past several hours when he had been quite pleasant. And he was always, *always* pleasant to look at.

Her stomach took just that moment to growl, and both she and Charlotte laughed.

"I'm famished," she admitted.

"After all the exertion of beating Lady Merrick, you must be." Charlotte leaned closer to Georgiana. "Did you see the expression on her face when Ridge hit her bowl away from the jack?"

"No, I didn't." Georgiana had been intently focused on the green and then on the duke.

"She was crushed. She wanted to win badly."

"I can't blame her—so did I." Georgiana took a moment to bask in the victory as they approached the blanket. The gentlemen who were already seated rose to their feet to greet them. Charlotte released her and went to her husband, leaving Georgiana to walk around the blanket to the duke, who sat by himself on the opposite side.

He helped her to settle onto the soft cotton cloth. "I can read your smile like a headline."

"And how do you read it?"

"The thrill of victory."

She hummed in agreement. "You have me there. Victory is *quite* sweet, don't you agree?"

"I don't have much experience with it, to be frank," the duke

said.

“Surely that can’t be true, Your Grace,” she said. “Dukes always win.”

He looked away as he uncorked a bottle of wine. “So say all those who aren’t dukes. And my friends call me Ridge, Miss Milford. You should, too.”

“Hm. I think not. *Your Grace.*”

Chuckling softly, he reached for two glasses and poured before handing one to her, then raising his glass. “To victory.”

“To victory,” she agreed. They clinked glasses, and she took a deep swallow of the excellent vintage.

“Ah!” Lady Merrick, who sat across the plates of food and drink from them, gestured in their direction. “Observe, everyone! The victors basking in their triumph.”

She inclined her head, gracious in defeat. Everyone raised their glasses to Georgiana and the duke, and Georgiana turned to him to catch him smiling at her again. Oh dear. His smile was bright and real, and it shot straight through her.

Both of them looked quickly away.

He turned to the food and made her a plate of roast chicken, cheese, and buttered bread, as well as a bowl of blackberries and peach slices. He offered both to her, and she took them, eating heartily until her stomach stopped complaining. Finally, she leaned back to appreciate the vast green lawn dotted with trees and flowers. Thankful for a reason to keep her gaze off the handsome, well-dressed man sitting beside her, she watched a pair of robins frolic on an overhead branch and sighed drowsily.

“It is lovely out here this time of year. I adore London, but I *do* love being in the country.”

“I don’t,” Desborough said.

She cut her eyes to him. “Do you disagree with everything I say on principle?”

“No, I only disagree when I *actually* disagree. And I haven’t

disagreed with everything you say. That's a gross exaggeration."

"Certainly not a *gross* exaggeration." She huffed out a breath and popped a blackberry into her mouth. After a moment, she asked, "Why do you hate the country?"

"Nothing good ever happens in the country," he said.

A laugh burst out of her. "Nonsense."

He shrugged. "That is my experience."

"Do all of you St. Clairs hate the country? Is that why your father allowed Clairwood to fall into such disrepair?" She asked the question lightly, but he didn't take it that way. She could *feel* the frigid temperature radiating from him.

"No."

She raised her brows. "So, your father liked it there, then?"

A marked chill entered his tone. "I couldn't say one way or another what my father liked."

"I see. You weren't close, then." She sighed. "I am very close with my parents. I couldn't imagine not knowing their preferences, at least some of them."

"Even *I* know many of your parents' preferences, and I haven't spoken to either of them face-to-face in years."

"Such as?" She leaned forward with interest. "Tell me what you know."

"They are particular about the things they own."

She thought of the lawn at Norton House—even more vast than this one—and the proper English garden behind the house. She thought about the pieces of furniture, art, and décor inside both Norton House and the London town house, and how everything had been chosen specifically for its aesthetic beauty or historical significance.

Her parents cared about their homes, their surroundings, and their contents because they had toiled for everything they had and knew each and every item's value. Quite unlike aristocrats like the St. Clairs, who had been handed down wealth and

possessions from generations long past.

“That’s true,” Georgiana said. “They cherish the things they own and treat them accordingly.”

“They cherish them a little too much, perhaps,” the duke said.

“How do you mean?”

“Just last week I received an overlong missive from your father’s steward. Ten droning pages to impart what could have been summarized in a sentence. Essentially, he was complaining that a new hay barn I am building on the northern boundary of my lands is too close to your father’s property and is an eyesore as viewed from the Norton House attic window.”

“Well, is it?”

“According to my surveyor, there are three full inches between the edge of the barn and my property line. Plenty of space, if you ask me. And as for it being an eyesore—” He shrugged. “It is a barn. It will save the people who work my lands the time and the backbreaking work of moving the hay from that end of the property to the opposite corner. Not to mention—who looks through attic windows? Your father will not have prominent guests staying up there and commenting on the ‘ruined view.’” He scoffed.

She couldn’t summon much of an argument against that, but still... “Three inches is a small space. Couldn’t you have moved the barn back from the property line a few feet?”

“It’s *my* property,” he grumbled. “I can do with it as I please.”

“Still, it might be the neighborly thing to move it back a foot or two.”

His jaw worked as he ground his teeth. “To move it at all would interfere with how the sun shines on the wheat crop and would likely kill a portion of it, which would, in effect, reduce the amount of income my land brings in.”

“Oh, I see,” she said bitterly. “Heaven forbid you should lose a few precious pounds of income.”

“Those lands have gone fallow for fifteen years. I’m trying to bring Clairwood Park out of ruin. I cannot do that if I make exceptions.”

She rolled her eyes. She knew she was provoking him, but she couldn’t stop. His attempt to play the hero with that nonsense about trying to pull the estate out of ruin was not going to work with her. She knew better.

“You won’t admit it,” she said in an all-knowing tone, “but the reason you won’t move the barn isn’t because of the effects on the crop—which, as far as I know, is nonexistent and has been for years. You won’t move it because you despise my family and wish to spite us.”

He didn’t answer. He was looking away, pouring himself another glass of wine, but the line of his shoulders was rigid.

“Spite won’t help relations between our families, Your Grace.”

She watched his eyes lose the sharp focus they’d had on her just a moment ago as his expression turned brittle. It was like he was closing himself off, turning into ice to shield himself from her scrutiny.

She’d pushed him too far.

He laughed sharply, a sound that scraped over her nerves. “Oh, so sanctimonious, Miss Milford. Just like your beloved father.” He took a deep draft of wine. “I fear nothing could help relations between our families. But that is not my fault.” He gave a negligent shrug, suddenly appearing bored by this conversation. “Nor is it my problem.”

Swallowing the rest of his wine in one gulp, he rose to his feet before giving her a concise nod. “Good day, Miss Milford.”

He swiveled away, and she watched his form grow smaller as he strode across the lawn and finally disappeared into the conservatory.

Chapter Seven

Theo didn't exactly manage to avoid Georgiana Milford that evening—in fact, Lady Merrick placed him right next to her at dinner. Fortunately, Miss Roundtree was seated on his opposite side.

Miss Roundtree, who knew nothing about his father, was a charming and talkative breath of fresh air.

Still, the haughty beauty on his other side kept drawing his eye. She was wearing an exquisite dinner dress of cream satin that brought out the pink in her lips and cheeks and the shine of her blond hair. He couldn't stop himself from looking again and again, and he'd been forced to utter something polite every time she noticed.

“Can I serve you some more meat?” he'd force himself to ask. Or, “Would you like me to refresh your wine?” Or, “Isn't the soup excellent?”

He'd managed to keep a grasp on politeness throughout the meal, which was more than could be said for the picnic, when she'd forced him to think about her self-congratulatory, self-important, priggish ass of a father.

Georgiana herself still seemed annoyed with him. She was airily polite and extremely aloof throughout the meal.

Well. He might have expected that.

After dinner, he had a glass of port with the gentlemen before they joined the ladies in the drawing room. He didn't last for long, though. When Viscount Hawkins sidled up to Georgiana near the pianoforte and started flirting with her, Theo couldn't bear it anymore and excused himself to his room.

Trying not to think of how Hawkins's lips had lingered on the back of Georgiana's gloved hand, Theo busied himself for the rest of the evening writing letters to his land steward and his man of business in London, as well as to his brother. From time to time, he heard muffled laughter from downstairs—his

mind automatically trying to sort out whether that was Georgiana's laugh—but he ended up falling asleep on the sofa with the duller book of all time—a tome on estate management Merrick had lent him—lying open on his chest.

The following morning after breakfast, the ladies walked to the village for a bit of shopping while the men stayed at the house. Theo fetched the book on estate management before trekking down to the conservatory, where he found Merrick and Trevelyan standing under a palm talking about one of the exotic plants Merrick had brought back from the Caribbean. Theo smiled—when he wasn't being forced to make pleasant conversation or engage in talk about polite society, Trevelyan was actually beginning to appear somewhat relaxed.

When the two men looked up to greet him, he held up the book. "This didn't have the ability to keep me conscious last night, Merrick. Mind if I borrow a different one?"

With a laugh, Merrick agreed. "Take whatever you want."

He excused himself, and Trevelyan joined him as he headed upstairs. "Saw you received some letters this morning. How are things at Clairwood Park?"

"The same. I sent Sebastian there last week."

"Really?" Trevelyan asked as they entered the library—a cozy space with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and two reading chairs flanking the tall, narrow window that looked out over the lawn.

Theo nodded. "I told him I'd pay his debts only if he agreed to cease gambling, spend some time at Clairwood Park, and make himself useful there."

"Do you think he'll do it?"

Theo shrugged. "Well, he's there. That's a start. We'll see what happens. I did forbid him from going into the village. The St. Clairs aren't welcome there, and I can just imagine him drinking, having an altercation—" He shuddered. "So I told him he wasn't to go. He's restricted to the estate grounds."

Trevelyan whistled through his teeth. "Hard to imagine a twenty-seven-year-old man agreeing to those terms."

Sebastian was a man full grown who controlled himself—or chose not to, as the case may be. Still, as much as his brother hated it, the fact was that Theo controlled his purse strings, and that did give him some power over his life.

“A man will agree to quite a few stipulations when his freedom is on the line. He was this close”—Theo held out his thumb and forefinger a hairsbreadth apart—“from being sent to debtors’ prison.” Theo turned back to the books, running his fingers over the book spines as he read the titles. “Anyhow, one of the letters I received this morning was from him. He seems to be settling in and keeping to the terms so far. He mentioned the estate’s been much improved since he was there last year.”

“That’s good.”

“Doesn’t mean much,” Theo said. “There’s a lot of work still to be done.”

“Perhaps you can give Sebastian a task to do while he’s there. Something that will give him purpose. Something he’ll be able to accomplish that he might find fulfilling in the end.”

Theo turned to his friend. “Such as?”

“Well, what are his interests?”

“Gambling. Drink. Women.”

Trevelyan sighed. “Anything else?”

“Not that I know of.”

Trevelyan thought for a moment. “You told me you’d like to improve the roads and water supply to the area, as well as modernize living conditions for your tenants. Perhaps you could choose one of those projects and have him oversee it for you.”

“Ah,” Theo said. “You mean something like what you do for your tenants every time I turn around? What was it last time? Oh, yes, settling a living on the groundskeeper’s daughter who ran off with that soldier. That was after building houses for several people in need, rescuing a missing child, pig-wrestling —”

“It wasn’t pig-wrestling,” Trevelyan groused.

Theo laughed. “Actually, I know just the thing for Sebastian. One of the villagers—the cobbler—married last year, and his poor wife has popped out four children—” At Trevelyan’s questioning look, he shook his head. “Don’t ask. Something to do with twins and the fact she was already with child when they married, but that still doesn’t entirely add up. I didn’t question him further. Anyhow, they live in a one-room cottage that certainly must be a bit crowded at this point. They need a new house.”

“Sebastian could build it for them.”

Theo raised his hand in mock alarm. “Whoa, now. Sebastian isn’t you, Trevelyan. The image of him wielding a hammer—terrifying. But perhaps he could begin to secure the required materials and workers to get it done efficiently—”

Trevelyan nodded and clapped a hand on Theo’s shoulder. “Sounds like a start.”

“I’ll write to him about it today.”

“Let him know how and where to start hunting for resources, then see how he responds. If his response is anything but ‘hell, no, I refuse,’ keep encouraging him.”

Theo nodded. He’d turned back to the bookshelf and was skimming a row of Shakespearean titles, his gaze and finger snagging on *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Trevelyan saw where he’d hesitated and chuckled. “Any progress with Miss Milford?”

Theo kept his gaze on the book spine. “What do you mean?”

“I saw your attempts at ingratiating yourself to her yesterday. Things seemed to be going well during lawn bowls and at dinner, but you both looked somewhat out of sorts at the picnic.”

Theo shook his head. “You misread her dinner attitude. She was cold as a fish, still angry about our discussion at the picnic.”

“What happened?”

“I accused her of being sanctimonious like her father.”

“Ridge.”

Theo turned to his friend. The disappointment in Trevelyan’s expression was undeniable. “What? It’s true. She was going on about how I needed to be more neighborly toward her father, as if that man has ever made any attempt at being anything but a vitriolic bag of wind toward me. He’s a pain in my arse, that’s what he is. *Neighborly*.” He gave a snort of disgust. “So ingratiating myself to her didn’t work.”

“Calling her sanctimonious wasn’t exactly ingratiating,” Trevelyan pointed out.

Theo threw up his hands. “But I *tried*. She pushed me too far. A man can only take so much abuse.” Even as he said the words, he knew he was being ridiculous.

“*Abuse*? Really?”

“All right. Fine. Not abuse. Needling. That’s what she does. She *needles*.”

“I’ve never seen her needle anyone.”

“She needles *me*.”

Trevelyan shrugged. “I still have never seen it.”

“Well, hopefully you won’t have to,” Theo told him, “because I’m staying well out of range of her pointy barbs.”

“So back to your plan of avoidance?”

Theo gave a short nod and turned back to the books, though the titles were a blur. “Exactly.”

“That’s proven difficult for you so far,” Trevelyan said. “I still think you should try to win her over instead.”

“Trust me, I’ll perfect the art of avoiding Miss Georgiana Milford,” Theo said. “I’ll be a Miss-Milford-avoidance expert in no time.”

...

The next morning, just before dawn, Anne entered Georgiana’s

room and shook her gently. "It's time to get ready for the grouse shoot, miss."

Georgiana stretched luxuriantly, then slipped out of bed and dressed in a high-waisted simple white muslin, over which she buttoned a green velvet pelisse cut in a way that resembled a man's hunting jacket. Sturdy leather boots, brown kid gloves, and a matching green velvet hat completed the ensemble, and a few moments later she headed to the breakfast room, where Lord Merrick, Lord Trevelyan, and Mr. Worthington were already sipping from steaming cups of coffee and tea.

She was buttering her toast at the sideboard when Desborough entered, stopping short in the doorway when he saw her.

She gaped at him in surprise. Wasn't he the one who liked to sleep in? She bit back a groan, even as she took in the fine cut of his deep brown hunting coat and the way the soft leather of his Hessian boots hugged his calves.

He regained his composure quickly. "Miss Milford," he drawled, moving to stand beside her to pour himself some tea. "Are you intending to join the shoot?"

"I am."

"Wonderful," he said, but his tone belied the sentiment. He didn't want her there.

Well, that was just fine. She didn't want *him* there, either.

"I'm surprised you know how to shoot." She turned with her toast in hand to retake her seat. He followed.

"Whatever gave you that idea?" he asked.

"One generally learns to shoot in the country. You despise the country and have spent much of your life avoiding it. Hence, one can reasonably deduce that you've had little opportunity to do much shooting."

His lip curled. "I assure you, I am an adequate shot. No, not adequate. *More* than adequate."

She chuckled. "I am quite a skilled markswoman. More skilled than you, I am sure."

“If I were a betting man, I’d place a wager on that.”

“Aren’t you?” she asked.

“Aren’t I what?”

“A betting man.”

He shook his head. “You don’t know me at all, do you? As much as you like to pretend you do. No, I am not a betting man. Never have been and never will be.”

“Ah, an anomaly amongst the St. Clairs, then.”

His tight jaw and hardening eyes confirmed she’d said the wrong thing. She looked down at her toast with a small sigh. “Well, I won’t bet you, but I’ll simply say—I believe I will bag more birds than you today.”

“Do you think so?” he asked coolly. “We’ll see about that.”

Chapter Eight

Theo would have walked out of the breakfast room and left Miss Milford to it, but that would have raised questions. So he'd gritted his teeth and sat as far away from her as possible.

After breakfast, they walked out to the stable block as a group. When Miss Milford chose a docile gelding to ride, Theo couldn't contain his surprised bark of laughter. "I expected you to choose the most ornery horse and prove to everyone that you could control him."

"I have no desire to battle a horse when I need to preserve my energy," she said.

"Preserve your energy for the exertions of the shoot?"

"To do battle."

"With whom?"

Miss Milford gave him a pointed look, then turned her horse away, preceding Theo across the moor, which gave him a perfect opportunity to study her without being noticed. She was an excellent rider, controlling the gelding with finesse and sitting tall and confident in her sidesaddle.

While he had dressed for the shoot in a finely tailored hunting jacket, buckskin breeches, a tartan waistcoat, and supple leather-top boots, she looked magnificent in deep-green velvet that cinched her small waist. Morning mist caught in the strands of her blond hair, making it shimmer beneath her velvet hat.

They approached Merrick's groundskeeper and the assembled dogs, all looking as excited and eager as Merrick himself was. Theo pulled his horse up beside Georgiana's as she dismounted and handed the reins to a waiting attendant before approaching the cart to choose a gun. As she had with the bowls, she selected carefully, lifting a few shotguns and studying their stock, weight, and barrel length before choosing a twelve-gauge with a shorter barrel. She inspected the muzzle before giving a nod of approval, taking one of the shot

pouches, and stepping back. Theo chose his own gun and pouch and moved to join the assembly.

Merrick signaled to the group of boys who'd take on the task of circling round the moor upwind of them to beat the game. Then, he turned to the company, a wide grin spreading over his face. "Let's go."

They walked uphill along the edge of an outcropping, over moss and winding through clumps of heather, where they could see the boys beginning to spread out below. Pausing beside a small, rocky rise, Mr. Worthington said, "I think this will be a good place to wait."

Merrick nodded and gestured to the rest of them to move on, intending for them to fan out in a wide arc to cover as much territory as possible. Trevelyan stopped behind a clump of bracken. Farther down, Merrick indicated a patch of cotton grass. "Miss Milford, would you like to position yourself here?"

"I'll hold out for a higher spot," Georgiana said primly. "I can't see well from here. Perhaps someone taller ought to take this position instead."

Theo barely refrained from rolling his eyes. "I'll take it."

He settled in the grass and waited.

After a quarter of an hour, the screech of a whistle rang out, then Theo heard shouting and stomping. He rose to a crouch as the dogs released a flurry of barks and an angry squawking rent the air—the challenging cock. A few seconds later, over a dozen grouse whirred through the air. Theo positioned his gun at the rising covey of birds.

He took aim, and as they flew over and in front of him, he fired, at the same time hearing the shots his companions made to his right and left.

He missed. The grouse he'd been aiming at cackled and flew off. To his right, he saw others go down, but he wasn't positioned to see what had happened to his left. The gamekeeper released the retrievers, and they bounded over the moor to fetch the downed birds.

Grumbling to himself, Theo knelt to reload his weapon. He'd have to do better if he was going to prove the overconfident Georgiana Milford wrong.

He finished quickly, and, rising, he heard footsteps behind him. He turned to see Georgiana approaching, pink-cheeked and flustered.

“What’s wrong?” he asked her.

“Right when the whistle blew,” she said breathlessly, “I looked down, and there was a spider crawling up my boot.”

“Ooh, not a *spider*,” he drawled.

She narrowed her eyes. “It was enormous and extremely aggressive. I’m quite sure it was venomous.”

“I assure you, Miss Milford, there are no critically venomous spiders in England.”

She sniffed. “Be that as it may, I should like to remain here. If we encounter another one, you may scare it off for me.”

“I *may*?” His lips twisted. “Very well. If you are attacked by an eight-legged fiend, I will play the gallant hero.”

“*Gallant* seems utterly incongruous, and *hero* is taking it too far. I am simply asking you to be a gentleman, for once.”

He frowned at the beautiful woman staring at him with one hand on her hip. “Have I ever—” He stopped. He’d been going to say, “Have I ever implied that I’m a gentleman?”

But...

Win her over.

Goddamn Trevelyan. What Theo really wanted was to take her into his arms and kiss that prim look off her face. Run his hands over her feminine curves and prove to her exactly how *not* a gentleman he was.

He readjusted his expression to something more conciliatory. “We’ll take turns, then.” He stepped aside from his spot and gestured her forward. Gallantly. “You’d best hurry. They’ll be flying by at any moment.”

“I still need to reload,” she told him.

“Use my gun.”

She eyed his shotgun critically. “No. I don’t like the grip on that one. You may go while I reload.”

“Why, thank you,” Theo said, doing a poor job at hiding the sarcasm lacing his voice.

She crouched to reload, and Theo watched her. He had to admit, Georgiana Milford knew how to handle a gun. She reloaded efficiently and safely, singularly focused on the task, a tiny furrow between her delicate brows and her lower lip clasped between her teeth.

She was so damn pretty when she wasn’t trying to aggravate him.

All right. He had to admit to himself that she was damn pretty even when she *was* aggravating him.

Especially when she was aggravating him. Everything about her lit him on fire.

The squawk of the grouse startled him, and he turned quickly, raised his gun, and sighted. He took the shot, but it was too late. He’d missed again.

He muttered a curse as he heard her soft laugh behind him. “Missed your chance. Too busy staring at me, were you?”

“Ensuring you were doing it correctly.”

She stepped beside him. “And was I?”

“Yes,” he admitted.

“Well, then. No need to hover over me next time.”

“I wasn’t hov—” He gritted his teeth.

“You remind me of my father.”

His brows shot up at that, and she smiled. “Even though he’s seen me load a gun a hundred times, he always watches over me like a hawk.”

“A hundred times? Sounds overly protective.”

“My parents are certainly protective. I’m not sure I’d add the ‘overly.’”

“What do they think of you being in Derbyshire with me?”

She scowled. “I’m not in Derbyshire *with* you. I’m in Derbyshire at Lord and Lady Merrick’s house party with my dear friend, Lady Trevelyan. And they don’t know you’re here.”

“Really? I thought you were close with your parents. I assumed that meant you didn’t keep secrets from them.”

“I generally don’t. But—” She shrugged. God, she smelled good. Sweet hints of rose rising from the earthy scents of the moor. “I didn’t want to upset them or cause them undue worry. And knowing that the Duke of Despots was here would certainly cause them to do both.”

The Duke of Despots. The words struck him like a punch to the heart, instantly followed by an icy feeling settling over his chest.

Usually, the ice masked his feelings. Today, however, it wasn’t working.

“I’m *not* the Duke of Despots. That moniker belonged to my father.”

“Evidently, you have inherited the moniker as well as the dukedom.” Georgiana shrugged, then cocked her head at him, her brows drawing together. “Why do you look annoyed? Are you saying it is undeserved?”

He pressed his lips together, not wanting to answer. Not wanting to be here, beside someone who called him that, who thought that of him, even as his body seemed to strain closer to her. The word emerged as if on its own volition. “Yes.”

“Really?” She turned fully to him, one fine brow in a cynical arch.

“Yes,” he bit out. “And I’m also tired. Tired of being constantly equated to my father. I know he was an ass. Why do you think I spent most of my life avoiding Clairwood Park? Because *he* was there. I wanted nothing to do with him—his

homes, his title, any of it. But he died, and I am the duke now, and I must bear this title and its responsibilities. Otherwise, rest assured, I'd sell Clairwood, wash my hands of it, and cut all ties to anything with any link whatsoever to that man."

He sucked in a breath. He had no idea how or why he'd just said all that to her. It was like she'd used some kind of witchery to loosen his tongue.

She gazed at him as if taken aback, her features softening. But the compassionate expression only lasted for a moment. He watched her grow stiff again, her mouth pinching like she'd tasted something sour. "Well," she huffed. "I'm certainly not surprised you'd rather sell it than take on the task of improving it."

He blew out a breath laden with frustration. He'd bared his soul, and still her opinion had not changed. No matter what he did or said, it seemed all the Milfords were destined to hate him.

He spoke through clenched teeth. "I came here for a respite. From Clairwood Park, from responsibility, from the dukedom. I needed to be away from the people who knew my father and assume I am a duplicate of him. I came here to be with my friend, Trevelyan, who knows me for who I am. I did not come here to be badgered by a smug termagant who takes every opportunity to jab at me with her sharp claws."

She gasped, and her eyes flared with rage. "Did you just call me a—"

"You are welcome to despise me as you see fit," he finished, "but I would ask that you despise me on my own merit, not on my father's."

That hadn't come out right, but it didn't matter. His outburst had probably just sealed her opinion of him as the goddamn Duke of Despots.

This was why he avoided confrontation at all costs. In any other situation, he would have walked away or shrugged off her scathing opinions and pretended not to care. But this woman had somehow broken through his defenses. He

clenched his hands over the stock of his gun. Damn.

She seemed to grow taller as she stood before him. “All my life, I have known I must avoid your family at all costs. I have been told by those I respect and admire that the St. Clairs are dangerous and despicable. I have seen lands fall into disrepair and people in our community suffer because of your family’s actions and *in*actions. And now you stand before me and admit you’d rather escape from those problems than address them. What *else* am I supposed to think of you?”

Right. Of course.

The worst part of it was, she was right. The previous duke *had* caused untold suffering to the community. And now, as much as Theo tried to undo his father’s mistakes, his first response to any serious problem had always been to put on an unaffected air. His second response was to escape from it.

Was that what he’d done here? Run away from his problems yet again? Left the serious issues at Clairwood Park behind to engage in frivolity at a house party?

A part of him knew the answer was yes.

He suddenly felt exhausted. He wished he’d walked out of breakfast, gone upstairs, and spent the day in peace.

After scrutinizing him for a moment, she gave a brusque nod. “Very well.”

Her change of tone had him on high alert. He narrowed his eyes at her. “Very well, what?”

“You’re right—I *should* judge you on your own merits, not your father’s. Forgive me for doing so; it was unfair of me.”

“It was,” he agreed. But she’d surprised him—he hadn’t expected her to make such an admission. The fact that she did intrigued him even more.

“You said you are trying to improve the situation at Clairwood Park, but those are mere words, Your Grace. A person must judge another based on his actions, not his words. After all, a man could say anything and mean quite the opposite.”

“True,” he conceded. “Although if you made the trip to Bedfordshire, I’m sure you’d already see a marked change in the estate.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “But that doesn’t help me now, does it?”

He shrugged.

“However...” she continued with a frown, “I must admit to something.”

“What is that?”

“Your discretion at Hyde Park. Even after my mother cut you, you offered your carriage to see me home. You protected me from scrutiny and gossip.”

He waited as she paused, hardly daring to breathe.

“But...” She shook her head. “But then you keep doing it,” she finished with a frown.

“Keep doing what?”

“Vexing me.”

“How have I vexed you?” he asked.

“You’re...provoking.”

“And you believe you’ve been completely docile toward me? Kind and sweet and gentle? Can you say honestly that you haven’t been trying to vex *me*?”

They stared at each other. As if from a distance, Theo heard another covey of grouse squawking overhead and the earth-shaking booms of the shotguns going off all around them. But neither of them flinched. Her eyes, a deep, mossy green in the bright morning sun, held him captive.

“Hm.” Her lips tipped up ever so slightly at their corners as she finally looked away. “Perhaps I have.”

...

Late the following afternoon, Georgiana wandered into the conservatory to find Desborough studying a plant bearing a

red, round fruit.

Yesterday's hunt had been equally stimulating and confusing. She'd not bagged any grouse, which had irritated her to no end. But clashing with the duke as she had made her feel *alive*. The way those blue eyes snapped at her. The way he looked at her... It made her feel... Well, she couldn't put a name to how it made her feel. All she knew was it gave her a feeling she'd never experienced before.

Now, she stepped deeper into the conservatory, pulled by some magnetic force she dared not delve too deeply into. She stopped when she was standing beside him. He was magnificent, as always, in buff trousers, a pale yellow, diamond-patterned waistcoat, and a sky-blue tailcoat. The light colors contrasted with his dark hair, and the blue of his coat enhanced the sapphire depths of his eyes.

"What are those?" She gestured to the plant he was studying. It grew on its own trellis, its pot separated slightly from the others in one of the rows of plants that bisected the conservatory. Bright red fruits dangled heavily from its branches.

"The French call them pommes d'amour, I believe." He glanced up at her. The jolt of awareness that ran through her every time he looked at her was something she really needed to learn to ignore.

She frowned. "Love-apples?"

"Or you might know them as tomatoes."

"Ooh." She studied the plant with more interest now. She'd never seen a tomato plant before. "They say those things turn your blood to acid and kill you."

"An old wives' tale, surely," he said mildly. "The French call them love-apples because they claim they have aphrodisiacal qualities."

She laughed. "So, if you dare to consume one, you'll either drop dead or be overwhelmed by lust."

He nodded and looked at her again, challenge flashing in his eyes. "Should I try one?"

“Absolutely not!”

But he'd picked one off the bush and was turning it over in his hand.

“It's rather pretty,” she admitted. “But sometimes the prettiest things are the deadliest.”

His gaze locked with hers. “Yes,” he said quietly. “I agree.”

A shiver ran down her spine.

Without taking his eyes off hers, he began to lift the tomato toward his mouth.

“I don't think—”

Too late. He did it. The thing squirted juice as his teeth broke through its skin. He chewed thoughtfully for a few moments and finally swallowed. She gaped at him in horror.

She realized with no small amount of surprise that she preferred him alive. Enemy or not, she did not want his blood to turn to acid.

He pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at his mouth. “Tastes odd.”

“What do you mean, odd?”

“It has the consistency of a...plum, perhaps, with a slightly tougher skin and soft flesh inside. But it has small seeds...” He was studying it again and showed her. “I believe I swallowed a few of them.”

“Why would you do that? That could be the poisonous part!”

He ignored her. “And it is somewhat sweet, but not sweet like an overripe plum, nor sour like an underripe one. It has a mild quality...slightly acidic.” At her wince, he added, “But certainly not acidic enough to poison my blood. Really, I've never tasted anything quite like it. Would you like to try?” He held it out to her, the bite taken out of it releasing a drop of juice she stepped back to avoid.

She shook her head, watching him warily.

He raised a brow. “Are you awaiting a sign of my imminent

death?” he asked with a small laugh.

“Well, yes, actually, I am. Perhaps we should ask Lady Merrick to send for a doctor, just in case.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary.”

She swallowed. “Are you sure?”

“Americans eat them,” he told her. “And that country has recently mustered a strong challenge against our interests in North America. I don’t think the love-apples are killing them there.”

“I’ve been to North America,” she retorted. “I saw no such plant, no such fruit, and no one eating them.”

Appearing unimpressed by her worldliness, he gave a careless shrug. “Maybe you were in the wrong part of America.”

That might be possible—as she’d specifically visited Halifax, Nova Scotia, where the climate was harsh and perhaps too far north for the odd red fruits to be grown. She narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re still alive. Do you feel any strange effects?”

His eyes twinkled. “Like the overwhelming urge to ravish you?”

An instant flush heated her cheeks. “That’s not what I meant! I mean, do you feel your breaths becoming short? Tightness in your throat? Swelling of any part of your body?” She flushed deeper. “Well...I mean, not swelling on *that* part. Oh Lord.” She threw up her arms in exasperation. “I’m just trying to ensure you’re not dying!”

“Thank you for your concern. And, no, I do not feel any sign of my imminent peril. No shortness of breath or tightness of throat.”

She noted he did not deny swelling, but Lord knew she wasn’t going to ask him about that again.

“Though, if it were to happen, I believe it’s not always instantaneous. The poison may require some time to take effect.” He shrugged, but he was smiling. His smile was rare,

and it somehow made him even more handsome.

She'd thought that was impossible.

He moved closer to her and spoke in a serious yet sensual voice. "You'd best keep an eye on me for the rest of the evening, just in case."

"Even if you don't drop dead from one bite, you might suffer some unwanted effect from it," she said archly, trying to shake off the fluttery feeling that had started low in her belly and was now spreading through her limbs, "and you ate it raw and straight off the plant, too. Surely that's not recommended."

"I will let you know if I suffer any effects—whether adverse..." He licked his lips again, and she drew in a shaky breath as he drew close and whispered into her ear, "Or erotic."

She opened her mouth. Closed it. Swallowed. Then said, as haughtily as she possibly could, "Informing me will not be necessary."

"No?" His eyes held a wicked glint as they raked over her.

She picked up her skirts, straightened her back, muttered, "Good afternoon, Your Grace," and fled the conservatory, flames licking over her chest.

...

Georgiana watched Desborough through dinner, where he behaved in his usual carefree manner. By now, she was convinced that the warnings she'd heard of tomatoes turning the blood to acid weren't true—the duke appeared as hale as ever. But the fact that he kept sending provocative glances at her throughout the meal made her wonder if there might be some truth about the tomato being an aphrodisiac.

After dinner, as she and the other ladies prepared to leave the men to enjoy their port, he skimmed her thigh with his fingertip, a touch that had sent sensation buzzing through her body. Then, as she rose, he cast a roguish grin in her direction. "I'll see you soon, Miss Milford. Perhaps later, we might..." He hesitated, and she froze halfway out of her seat. "...further

discuss the allure of tropical shrubs.”

“Are you a student of exotic plants, Desborough?” Lord Merrick exclaimed. “It is my great passion—”

Georgiana narrowed her eyes at him before turning away and linking arms with Charlotte. They walked out of the dining room, leaving the men to their plant talk in favor of discussing London gossip in the drawing room.

The duke wouldn’t stop goading her. The wretch. The *scoundrel*. She’d have her revenge. Somehow.

Charlotte came to sit beside her. “You seem distracted this evening.”

Georgiana glanced up from her wine glass to see several of the ladies’ interested faces peering at her. “Oh, I was just thinking how lovely it is here.” She smiled at Lady Merrick. “I am so grateful I had the opportunity to attend. Thank you.”

So far, the party hadn’t been at all what Georgiana had expected—which was a lovely time with Charlotte and new friends. Instead, the days here had been filled with her trying, and failing, to avoid the Duke of Desborough and then her various encounters with him, all of which had left her feeling...out of sorts. Confused. Not quite sure which way was up and which was down.

“And I have been so happy to have you,” Lady Merrick said, then grinned at the ladies assembled. “All of you, in fact. I have enjoyed your company so much, I wish I could have a house party every month!”

“Oh, would you?” exclaimed Miss Roundtree, hands clasped at her chest, and everyone laughed.

Lady Merrick leaned in and lowered her voice conspiratorially. “Now, back to the parlor games. I don’t want to give the gentlemen an ounce of input. We alone must decide what to play.”

“Ooh, I know...” Charlotte clapped her hands together, her eyes glinting mischievously. “Let’s play the aviary!”

Georgiana had never played the game, but she knew it

involved assigning oneself a species of bird and then guessing others' choices. It had the potential to become quite scandalous because, depending on the accuracy of your guess, you must tell a person a secret, proclaim your everlasting love for them, or have them pay a forfeit.

Sometimes the forfeits could be even more scandalous than the secrets and the declarations of love. Looking around at the assembled ladies' flushed faces, Georgiana was certain they'd decide on forfeits far wickeder than pennies.

"Yes!" Miss Roundtree agreed. "The aviary is so much fun!"

Lady Merrick nodded in agreement. "All right, we'll play the aviary. What else?"

"How about blind man's buff?" Miss Kendall suggested. "But..." she added slyly, "*not* the version where you stagger about clumsily or simply touch someone's knee."

"I agree—that's a silly way to play," Miss Roundtree said. "A light brush of someone's knee doesn't say a single thing about the person's identity!"

Miss Kendall nodded in sage agreement. "I propose we blindfold someone, then choose a person to sit on a chair. The blindfolded person must sit on their lap and then, using only the power of touch, must guess their identity."

"How *scandalous!*" Charlotte exclaimed, but she was grinning from ear to ear.

Miss Kendall hid her titter behind her gloved hand. "And forfeits must be paid with kisses!"

"Forfeits must follow the rules of 'kiss if you can'!" Miss Roundtree declared.

Lady Merrick turned to her sister in mock horror. "You are an innocent young lady, Evie. How do you know of such things?"

Miss Roundtree looked at Miss Kendall, and they both erupted in giggles.

Charlotte clasped her hands together. "Oh, let's do it. Just a bit of innocent fun."

“I think it *will* be fun.” Lady Merrick turned to Georgiana.
“What do you think, Miss Milford?”

Charlotte believed secrets and lap-sitting and forfeits paid with kisses were *innocent*? And Georgiana would be expected to do these things in the same room as the Duke of Desborough?

There were many words she might use to describe how she thought the evening would go.

“Fun” was not one of them.

Chapter Nine

The first game they played was blind man's buff. When everyone drew lots, Lord Hawkins chose the lowest card, and Lord Merrick tied the blindfold over the viscount's eyes. They drew again, and Charlotte lost, so she quietly took the chair that had been placed in the center of the room. Lord Merrick walked Lord Hawkins over and pressed him down on Charlotte's lap, his back facing her front.

Hawkins chuckled before declaring, "Well, I don't have to touch anything to know the fine bones under my hindquarters are those of a woman!"

Charlotte and Georgiana shared a wincing glance.

"Is it the delightful Miss Milford?" Hawkins inquired, his bare hands on Charlotte's thighs. She was holding still, a grimace frozen on her face. Hawkins's guess wasn't a terrible one—both Charlotte and Georgiana were wearing sleek satin tonight.

Lord Merrick cleared his throat. "No. Not Miss Milford. You must pay a forfeit, Hawkins. Next time, be more careful in your guesses."

"Hmm." Hawkins reached behind him. "I have an idea..." His fingertips skimmed up Charlotte's bodice. As he neared her breast, Lord Trevelyan surged to his feet, growling, "Hawkins—"

"Lady Trevelyan!" Hawkins jumped up and ripped off the blindfold. "Ah, I was right!"

Everyone applauded and laughed. Charlotte went to her grumpy husband, slid an arm around his waist, and whispered something into his ear that immediately settled him.

"Since your first guess was incorrect, Lord Hawkins, you owe one forfeit," Lady Merrick said, "which you must pay at a later time. I'm keeping track." She held up a pencil and a scrap of paper. "Now, who's next?"

Georgiana drew the two of clubs, the lowest card possible.

As they tied on her blindfold, she hoped she didn't end up sitting on Lord Hawkins's or Mr. Worthington's laps. Or the duke's.

Or...maybe a part of her *did* wish to sit on the duke's lap.

She felt breathy with anticipation. What if it was him?

Sturdy hands walked her back and pressed on her shoulders. She sat, gingerly.

She knew instantly, by the firmness of the legs under her, no sign of the delicate fabric of a gown, that she was sitting on a man.

Straightening her spine, she did her best to behave casually—even though a part of her was howling at her that she'd never sat on any man's lap in her life, except her father's, and the last time she'd done that, she'd only been a handful of years old.

"Hm," she murmured breezily. "Let's see."

All right. It was a man. Could be any one of five. She shifted, and she felt a muscle flex beneath her bottom.

Breathe, Georgiana.

Behind her, as if hearing her thoughts, the man let out a slow breath.

She knew who it was instantly, and warmth prickled through her. Her attention on him over the past three days had been so focused, she would know the sound of that sighing breath anywhere.

She opened her mouth to proclaim her answer but stopped.

She'd wanted vengeance for the tomato episode, hadn't she? Well, this was her chance. And...it was an opportunity to touch the fine fabrics he wore. Her fingers had been itching to do so all evening.

Forcefully keeping her expression blank to not expose the glee rising inside her, she reached down and trailed her hand beneath her bottom, along the outside of his rigid thigh. The man behind her went very still as her fingers moved along.

The nankeen pantaloons were tight, as fashion dictated, and buttery soft, and she traced the contours of thick muscle. Heat traveled through her hand as she moved over the side of his hip to his waistband. When she reached the small gap between his pantaloons and the sharp cut of his tailcoat, she ran her fingertips over the tiny bumps of slick embroidery edging his silk waistcoat.

He was so still, Georgiana was certain he wasn't breathing. The assemblage had gone still as well, though she could feel their watchful eyes.

Adjusting her position, she turned ninety degrees and twisted a bit so she faced him. She caught a whiff of cloves and rosemary and felt the edges of her lips tipping into a smile.

"Hm." She pinched the bottom edge of his tailcoat between her fingers, appreciating the soft fineness of the wool. "Well, he is wearing a tailcoat, but that doesn't help at all," she complained, adding a slight pout to her voice for the benefit of the party. "There are five people here wearing tailcoats tonight." She let out a long-suffering sigh. "I fear I must investigate further."

The man beneath her remained rigid as she followed the edge of the open tailcoat. Her fingers moved up over the silky cloth-covered buttons—one, two, three—and then she reached the edge of his collar.

Would she give herself away if she didn't declare who it was now? She didn't think so. She hadn't really noticed what any of the other men were wearing, but surely more than one of them wore open, single-breasted coats with cloth-covered buttons.

She frowned. "Oh dear," she murmured. "I'm afraid I still do not dare to wager a guess."

A woman tittered. Probably Miss Kendall.

Reaching out until her palms landed on his chest, she soaked up the sensation of having her hands on him for perhaps a second too long before returning to herself and continuing her perusal.

She tiptoed her fingertips up, over the high starched collar of his waistcoat and to his jaw, shaved smooth for the evening. He sucked in a small breath—probably imperceptible to the onlookers but not to her.

It made her feel powerful.

She cupped his face in her hands, his skin warm, feeling the contours of his high cheekbones and sharp jaw. Then, she slowly slid her hands closer together, then down, until her fingertips traced his lips.

Soft. Warm. A hint of breath puffing over her fingers.

She shuddered.

She had to end this before she truly gave herself away.

“I think it’s the duke,” she said, her voice emerging lower and far more huskily than she’d intended.

She let him go and pulled the blindfold up over her eyes as the assembly cheered. She grinned at him, but his expression was dark.

Was he angry? She supposed that’s what she got for playing with fire. Her smile widened, and she raised one brow as if daring him—*try to top that!* Standing, she went to Charlotte, who had a slight frown on her face as she watched Desborough. As soon as Georgiana reached her friend, though, the frown disappeared, and Charlotte applauded. “Well done!”

“I thought for a moment you wouldn’t do it,” Miss Roundtree said with a giggle. “But you *did*.”

“I couldn’t risk having to pay a forfeit, now, could I?” Georgiana said. “And I daresay the gentlemen have an advantage over the ladies in this game. They are all dressed the same”—she quickly glanced around to ensure that was actually correct, then went on when she confirmed it was—“whereas all our dresses are quite different.”

“Not true, not true!” Mr. Worthington cried. “I couldn’t discern silk from muslin.”

She looked at the banker askance, thinking *Surely not—how could one not distinguish silk from muslin?*—and then she

glanced at the duke. He still had that dark expression on his face, but now he was giving her a look that made a shudder run down her spine.

Anticipation? Fear? Dread or excitement? She didn't know.

The look said he was definitely planning *his* revenge.

Chapter Ten

If the minx thought she could get away with running her curious little fingers over his body, making him hard in genteel company, then laughing at him—

She didn't know him very well, now, did she?

After her flustered escape from the conservatory earlier in the day, her forward, confident touches had shocked him. They had also intrigued him and aroused him. Judging by the knowing quirk of her lips, she knew exactly what she had done.

It made him desperate for vengeance.

Theo bided his time until they began to play the aviary, and he studied her. Every move she made fascinated him. The pointed looks she gave and that finely arched brow of hers made him want nothing more than to kiss her until those sharp expressions softened and she was a puddle of desire begging him for more.

What kind of bird would she choose? Would she select something brash and colorful, like a peacock? Or would she lean toward hiding her true nature and pretend to be a bird that resembled her not at all, like a dove or a sparrow?

Fortunately, the options were narrowed somewhat when Charlotte declared herself the birdwoman and announced a list of twenty birds that they could pick from. "Decide carefully," Charlotte said. "If you select a bird someone has already chosen, you must pay a forfeit."

So far, only one person had earned a forfeit—and that was Hawkins at the beginning of blind man's buff. The rest of them had guessed the person whose lap they sat on more judiciously, and they'd all chosen correctly.

Theo glanced at Hawkins—who had, as usual, positioned himself near Miss Milford and was gazing at her, eyes wide with contrived adoration. Theo ground his teeth. The man was a few years younger than him, and while he was a viscount, he

was also an impoverished one. In hopes of snaring the heiress to finance his hopes for a life of leisure, Hawkins was attempting to butter her up.

The way the viscount looked at her made Theo sick to his stomach. She, on the other hand, seemed immune to all his buttering and treated him with that haughty, cool aloofness Theo knew so intimately. He liked that haughty, cool aloofness very well when it wasn't directed at him. He smiled to himself as, looking down her nose at Hawkins though he was several inches taller, she moved away from him, placing Trevelyan between them.

God, she wasn't only beautiful—she was magnificent.

When they drew lots, Theo picked the falcon for himself—it seemed appropriate, since his forebears had kept falcons. In any case, falcons were noble birds. If he were to be reborn as a bird, he wouldn't object to becoming a fast, sleek, powerful falcon.

After he made his selection, he studied the list of birds. Miss Milford should choose the swan—beautiful, strong, forthright, but prepared to tear into anyone who might wrong her.

But would she?

She ended up being last to select her bird. When she gave Charlotte her choice, Charlotte shook her head. “Sorry, that bird has already been chosen. You must pay a forfeit.”

Lady Merrick added Georgiana's name to the short list of forfeits that needed to be paid.

“Drat.” Georgiana scowled. “And I thought I was being so original.”

Original? Theo pondered this.

“What is your second choice?” Charlotte asked.

Georgiana scrawled down another bird on the piece of paper. Theo wanted to press his thumb to the frown line that appeared between her brows and smooth it away.

“Sorry, no. That one's been taken, too. Another forfeit for you.”

Georgiana growled, and Theo's pulse jumped. Damn, that was a seductive sound.

Blowing out a puff of air, she wrote the third animal. A shorter name, as it only took her a second to write it.

Theo smiled. He knew.

“Very good. My aviary is complete,” Charlotte announced. “Now, each of you must write your bird identity on the slip of paper I have provided you, followed by your answers to three questions.”

Everyone nodded.

“The first question is, to which of my birds will you give your heart?”

“What happens if we write down a bird no one chose?” asked her husband.

She grinned. “Then you pay a forfeit.”

Theo wrote, *I give my heart to the swan.*

“Now for my second question,” Charlotte said when everyone had stopped writing. “To whom will you tell a secret?”

Theo wrote, *I give my secret to the owl.*

“And the last,” Charlotte said when the assembly was ready. “Tell me which bird you dislike the most—from whom will you pluck a feather? That bird will have to pay a forfeit.”

Theo wrote, *I pluck a feather from the hawk.* It was damned predictable who'd chosen the hawk.

They handed the papers back, and Charlotte mixed them, then drew one from the pile. “First to go will be...the eagle! My husband.” She cast a fond look in Trevelyan's direction and continued. “Now, you must give your love to the parrot... Lady Merrick!”

Trevelyan nodded and knelt before Lady Merrick. “I offer you my love, madam,” he said flatly.

She clutched her chest in delight and beamed.

“Now, give your secret to the falcon, and the falcon is... Ridge!”

Trevelyan rose and stepped over to Theo. Leaning toward him, he rumbled into his ear, “I hate these goddamn games.”

Theo choked out a laugh, and Trevelyan pulled back, smiling grimly.

“And pluck a feather from the robin!” Charlotte exclaimed.

“Oh no!” Miss Kendall cried. She pouted. “*Why* would you pluck a feather from a cheerful robin, my lord?”

“And the robin is Miss Kendall,” Charlotte finished. “Sorry, Miss Kendall, but you must pay a forfeit.”

Trevelyan gave her an apologetic look. “Forgive me, Miss Kendall.”

“I have a feeling there are going to be so many forfeits, we’re going to be spending the rest of the night paying them,” Merrick said.

“Just a few quick kisses,” Lady Merrick teased. “I daresay it won’t take very long at all!”

They went through a few other birds in similar fashion. When Hawkins pulled a feather from the falcon, he laughed. “Serves you right, Desborough. I had to pay another forfeit because I tried to choose the deuced falcon after you did. Since I couldn’t be the falcon, I had to be the hawk.”

Theo shrugged. Turnabout was fair play. Hawkins would find out soon enough that Theo had plucked one of his own feathers.

Before long, Charlotte pulled out Theo’s paper. “It’s the falcon’s turn. First, you must declare your love to Miss Roundtree, the swan.”

Theo knelt before Miss Roundtree, who pressed a palm over her mouth to stifle a giggle. Her blue eyes danced merrily above her gloved hand.

“My dear Miss Roundtree,” he said, clasping his hands at his chest. “I offer you my everlasting love.”

“Why thank you, kind sir,” she said.

“You must offer a secret to the owl,” Charlotte announced.

Everyone looked around, curious. No one but Theo knew who the owl was. He turned to where Georgiana was seated, feeling a small grin tip his lips. She licked her own lips as he approached her and lowered himself onto one knee.

“The owl is Miss Milford,” Charlotte was saying, but Theo barely heard her. He’d locked eyes with Georgiana.

“Time to hear my secret, Miss Milford,” he said in a low voice.

She leaned slightly toward him, her body stiff, and he cupped one hand around her ear, sliding the other around her head to hold her securely in place. Her hair felt like silk under his fingertips. “It took its time,” he whispered, “but I fear the tomato has begun its work.”

She jerked in his hold.

“Shhh,” he told her. “I’m not dying. It is the other concern.”

She went still.

“I’ve been watching you all night. Imagining how your sensual lips—your perfect body—would feel beneath mine.”

She gasped audibly.

“I can’t stop thinking about it,” he whispered. “About *you*.” Then, letting his thumb skim lightly over the shell of her ear, he let her go.

She pulled back, staring at him with wide eyes.

He rose and, smiling to himself, took his seat, hardly hearing Hawkins’s grumbling as Charlotte informed him that the duke had plucked one of his hawk feathers and he’d have to pay another forfeit.

Chapter Eleven

Georgiana vaguely heard Charlotte announce that Miss Roundtree was next. As they were nearly at the end of the game, everyone's avian identity was common knowledge now. But the roaring in Georgiana's ears was so great, she didn't hear any of Miss Roundtree's selections.

The things the duke had said to her...the images they'd conjured...the way his finger had slid along her ear... His touch had been so soft, but a powerful force had resonated through her, leaving her trembling and breathless.

No one had ever said such things to her. No one had ever touched her like that.

She should be enraged at his audacity.

The problem was, she wasn't enraged. Instead, she was curious, excited. With a force she didn't expect or understand, she wanted more of his touch.

She knew that he'd done it on purpose to rattle her.

Well, he'd succeeded, because her very bones were rattled. She slid a glance his way to find him watching her, that wicked smile still curving his lips.

The rogue!

The rogue you want to—

She licked her dry lips and dragged her gaze away from him, trying to summon her righteous anger.

To no avail.

If it had been anyone else, she would have been furious. She probably would have slapped him. Hard.

But it hadn't been anyone else. It had been the confounding, annoying, handsome-as-sin duke.

Your family's mortal enemy, she reminded herself.

But he wasn't, was he? She knew at least a little of him now,

and he wasn't the man her parents had described.

"And last but not least, Miss Milford," Charlotte exclaimed.

It was her turn. Georgiana tried to look interested in the game. She steadfastly avoided glancing at the duke again, but she could feel his gaze on her, burning through her like he knew exactly how his words and touch had affected her.

"The owl will now declare her love to..." Charlotte hesitated to build suspense. "...the robin!"

Georgiana had not been so foolish as to choose one of the more masculine birds—she was not about to declare love to any of the men in this company. She knelt before Miss Kendall.

"Miss Kendall," she said, batting her eyelashes at the younger woman. "I love you dearly."

"At least *someone* loves me," Miss Kendall quipped. It was the first and only time she'd been offered love, while Miss Roundtree had received four declarations. Everyone laughed.

"You must tell a secret to the eagle," Charlotte said.

Georgiana turned to the eagle—Lord Trevelyan. She'd thought that Desborough might have chosen the eagle, and she'd spent a few moments thinking of various "secrets" she might tell the duke.

How long can you hold your breath, sir? Because you seemed to hold it for an inordinate amount of time while I was sitting on your lap. Were you really so unsettled by my proximity?

You have very fine... Here, she'd pause for a drawn-out second, leaving him to imagine what part of him she thought was fine. ...*buttons.*

I'm inclined to think your valet poured you into those pantaloons this evening. They are so tight, I can see every curve of your...

I'm glad the tomato didn't kill you...

She'd been thinking that last one might be a little too honest

when the game had started and Charlotte had revealed Lord Trevelyan as the eagle, bringing her fantasy to an abrupt halt.

Now, she stood and turned from Miss Kendall, went to the earl, and leaned down to whisper in his ear.

“I...”

She had nothing to tell him.

Well, that wasn't true. She was fairly brimming with secrets right now.

“His Grace,” she whispered before she could stop herself. “The... What he...”

Oh dear. This was a bungle of epic proportions. She had to fix this.

“He didn't say anything of importance when he told me his secret,” she finished desperately. “Nothing at all.”

She pulled back, leaving Lord Trevelyan looking at her quizzically.

Good Lord.

She spun around to Charlotte and cut her friend off before she could read. “And I pull the feather from the hawk.”

Lord Hawkins groaned—he attempted to make it sound like a good-natured groan, but Georgiana, and probably everyone else, sensed true annoyance in it. “I feel harassed,” he said glumly. It was true—he'd racked up quite a few forfeits by this point.

“You made it too easy, man.” Mr. Worthington gave him a sympathetic pat on the back.

Serves him right, Georgiana thought distractedly. The man wouldn't stop falsely fawning over her.

“But do not despair overmuch,” the banker added. “You might be able to steal a kiss from every lady in attendance, Hawkins!”

She grimaced, but then the hairs prickled on the back of her neck—Desborough's eyes were on her again. She could *feel*

them.

She had to get out of there.

“It has been a long night,” she told the room at large. “I think I shall retire—”

“Not so fast, Miss Milford,” Lady Merrick said. “You owe two forfeits that must be paid.”

Hawkins guffawed. “Trying to evade your debts, are you, Miss Milford?”

“No,” she said. “I forgot, that’s all.” She retook her seat, but her whole body was vibrating with discomfort.

“Oh, do show the poor lady some mercy,” Charlotte said. “Let her pay her forfeits first so she may be excused.”

“Are you all amenable to that plan?” Lady Merrick asked.

Everyone nodded their assent, and Lady Merrick gestured to the two glass bowls sitting on the ornate little table beside the sofa. “One of these bowls contains the ladies’ names—one entry into the bowl for each forfeit you must pay—except Lady Trevelyan, who earned no forfeits. The other bowl contains the gentlemen’s names.”

She gestured to an open spot at the center of the room. “There is where you must kneel, back-to-back, to pay your forfeit. When you are given the word to begin, the lady shall look over her left shoulder, while the gentleman looks over his right. The gentleman must attempt to kiss her cheek or her lips, and the lady must do her best to foil that attempt. If the gentleman misses, he must beg the lady’s forgiveness and promise to behave better.” Lady Merrick looked from person to person. “Does everyone understand?”

Georgiana glanced at Lord Trevelyan, who was clearly relieved his wife was having no part of these forfeits. She heartily hoped Lady Merrick would choose Trevelyan as her first forfeit partner because his attempt to kiss anyone other than his wife would surely be less than half-hearted.

Lady Merrick looked into one of the bowls and fished out Georgiana’s first forfeit slip. “Miss Milford, for your first

forfeit, you shall be paired with—” She drew from the second bowl. “Lord Hawkins!”

Ugh.

The viscount grinned. He clapped his hands together once, moved to the center of the open space, lowered himself to his knees, and sat back on his heels.

Feeling like her body was weighted down with lead, Georgiana joined him, moving so she was back-to-back with him but not touching.

He inched back so their bodies were pressed together from their bottoms to their heads. Well—her head. It was pressed into the groove of his back between his shoulder blades. Georgiana gritted her teeth and leaned away from him.

“Are you ready?” Lady Merrick asked.

“I am!” declared Lord Hawkins.

“Yes,” Georgiana muttered.

“And...begin!” Lady Merrick called out.

Georgiana turned her head to the left. From the corner of her eye, she saw a flash of Lord Hawkins’s face turning down toward hers, but she jerked her head away and leaped up. He jumped up just behind her, reaching out to grab her, but she slid neatly out of his grip.

“Bravo!” Charlotte cried.

“A slippery eel, that one!” Mr. Worthington exclaimed, clapping his hands together in delight.

Hawkins laughed good-naturedly. “You evaded me this time, Miss Milford. But if we meet again—”

Never, Georgiana thought sourly. Arms crossed over her chest, she turned to Lady Merrick. “Next?”

Lady Merrick raised her hand. “One moment. Lord Hawkins, you haven’t finished paying your forfeit.”

Behind her, Hawkins cleared his throat. Then he snagged her hand in his own and tugged her around so she faced him again.

She raised an imperious brow at him.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Milford. I promise I will...do better next time.”

He twisted the words to imply he would catch her and kiss her next time, *not* behave better. He pressed a hard kiss to the back of her hand, then let her go and bowed low.

“Well done!” Miss Roundtree proclaimed.

Georgiana turned back to Lady Merrick, prompting her to hurry this along.

“The next forfeit Miss Milford will pay will be with...” She slowly drew out another paper. “...the duke!”

“Desborough, you lucky dog!” Mr. Worthington said.

Georgiana stifled a groan. She glanced at the duke to see him giving her an assessing look before rising from his chair and heading toward her. He held out his arm.

“Shall we, Miss Milford?”

She sighed. “I suppose so. The sooner it is done, the sooner it will be over.”

They went to the center of the room and knelt with their backs facing each other. Unlike Hawkins’s, Desborough’s back didn’t quite touch hers, though she could feel his heat and smell his crisp country scent. She resisted the completely unwelcome urge to scoot back until his body pressed against her and breathe him in.

“Ready,” Lady Merrick said, “begin!”

Georgiana turned to look over her left shoulder. Desborough looked over his right. But she didn’t feel the sensation of him craning for her as she had from Hawkins. She caught a glimpse of his lips, parted slightly, before she quickly turned away and jumped up as she had last time. But her foot caught on her hem, and she lurched ungracefully forward.

Dear God, she had time to think as her arms windmilled, trying to stop her body from the inevitable plunge to the floor.

Before she face-planted on the carpet, strong hands caught

her round the waist. *Again*. They tugged her firmly against his body, and she had the slightest moment of awe at how oddly *right* it felt as his front was pressed to her back.

“There now,” the duke murmured, his lips brushing her ear. “We wouldn’t want you to fall again, Miss Milford.”

He released her and took a step back.

Twice she had been clumsy in his presence. She was *not* a clumsy person.

She gritted her teeth. This was not to be endured.

She took a step toward the door, and then, clenching her jaw, remembered the final requirement of the forfeit.

She turned to the duke. “Thank you for rescuing me, Your Grace. Again.”

“At your service, Miss Milford. And forgive me for my rudeness,” he added, his eyes twinkling in the lamplight. “I vow henceforth to behave better.”

She stared at him a moment before turning away.

She didn’t believe him for one second.

Chapter Twelve

Theo and Charlotte rose late the following morning. Everyone else—besides Trevelyan, who was downstairs reading the newspaper—had already left for a morning of fishing on the River Noe.

As they ate their late breakfast, Charlotte regarded her husband fondly, then turned her gaze to Theo. “I think Finn’s pleased to have a moment of peace after all the excitement last night.”

Behind his paper, Trevelyan nodded. “And this morning. At breakfast, no one would stop talking about who kissed who. It was unbearable.”

“Oh, surely it wasn’t *entirely* unbearable,” Charlotte said. “I’m certain that’s the first time either Miss Kendall or Miss Roundtree has ever been kissed. Allow them a moment to glory in it, will you?”

Trevelyan made a grumbling noise while Theo shared a smile with Charlotte. He was happy the two of them had finally found each other. Trevelyan had loved Charlotte since they were children, but he’d thought the man would never have the courage to tell her.

It had taken Trevelyan losing her, and nearly losing his own life, for him to share his heart. And now they’d been happily married for over a year.

Trevelyan was a good man. He deserved all the happiness he’d been given and more.

“Yet surely you cannot say you are having a terrible time?” Charlotte asked him.

“Not terrible,” Trevelyan admitted.

Theo snorted. “Really? The secret you told me last night was that you hated those games.”

Charlotte gasped. “Finn!”

“They weren’t my favorite,” Trevelyan admitted.

She leaned her head on his shoulder. “I suppose I could have predicted that.” She laughed softly. “Your expression when Lady Merrick tried to kiss *you*...”

Taking a sip of his coffee, Theo grinned. That had been hilarious. Lady Merrick had dived in for the kiss, and Trevelyan had twisted away, releasing a high-pitched squeal like a girl horrified by the attentions of a brazen suitor.

“Deuced uncomfortable,” Trevelyan muttered.

A footman entered the room bearing a silver salver. He bowed. “Sorry for the interruption, but a letter has arrived for you, Your Grace.”

Theo took the folded note from the proffered tray. “It’s from Sebastian.” He slid his finger under the seal and opened it.

Theo,

Your idea didn’t go as planned. I spoke to the cobbler, Gerald Dunn. Despite his obvious revulsion when he laid eyes on me—thank our dear father for that—we set the plan in motion. Found a good plot of land just outside the village. Had Smythe prepare a sketch and was near to obtaining the lumber when, alas, our favorite neighbor caught wind of the scheme and stopped it before it began. He has his own workers there adding three rooms to Dunn’s current hovel. My input no longer welcome.

Finding country life dull. Time I returned to London. What say you?

Sebastian

Theo passed it to Trevelyan, who read. When he finished, he looked up, brow furrowed. “Milford?”

Of course it was Milford. Who else would have the audacity to push aside a project initiated by a St. Clair?

“Definitely,” Theo confirmed. “The moment I try to take a step forward, the man pushes me two steps back.”

Trevelyan sighed. “Are you planning to give your brother leave to return to London?”

“I’d rather not. But it’s going to be more difficult to convince him to stay if there’s nothing for him to do there.”

“We’ll think of something,” Trevelyan mused. “Something productive while at the same time something Milford can’t stick his nose into.”

Charlotte winced. “I find it uncomfortable when we speak of Georgiana’s father like this. But I know it’s necessary, so I should probably excuse myself from the conversation.” She took a final sip of her tea, then stood. Theo and Trevelyan rose with her. “I think I’ll take a stroll on the grounds,” she told them.

Trevelyan folded his paper and laid it on the table. “I’ll go with you.” He turned to Theo. “We’ll continue our conversation later.”

“Of course,” Theo said.

Charlotte looked at him. “Would you like to join us, Ridge?”

Theo glanced outside, where sunlight glistened on the dew-covered grass. He set his coffee cup down. “I’d love to.”

They went upstairs to fetch their headwear before meeting on the terrace. A few minutes later, Charlotte emerged from the house wearing a bright smile beneath her straw bonnet tied under her chin with a jaunty blue ribbon. She walked arm in arm with her husband, who wore a somber black top hat and his usual scowl. Theo grinned at the pair of them—the Sunshine of the Ton and the grumpy earl. They were perfect together.

They headed down the steps to the expansive lawn. The air smelled of freshly cut grass and elderflowers. As they strolled toward the bowling green, Charlotte said, “So, we wished to speak with you about something, Ridge.”

“Oh?”

Charlotte looked expectantly at her husband, who sliced a glance his way. As usual, Trevelyan proceeded straight to the point. “What’s going on with you and Miss Milford?”

Theo barked out a laugh. “Miss Milford and me? Nothing.”

Nothing at all. *Unfortunately.*

No, no, no, Theo chastised himself. *Fortunately.* It was a Very Good Thing that nothing was “going on” between him and Georgiana.

Trevelyan made a scoffing noise. Charlotte narrowed her eyes at Theo. “The looks you were exchanging last night were hot enough to roast a chicken.”

Theo’s mouth dropped open. “I protest! No chickens were roasted—or harmed in the least—by our ‘looks’ last night.”

“You told me you disliked her,” Trevelyan accused.

“I’m certain I didn’t say that, exactly,” Theo said. And what he felt for Georgiana now...well, it definitely wasn’t “dislike.”

That was disturbing.

“She told me something similar,” Charlotte said. “But now she doesn’t seem to...” She shook her head. “Well. If dislike is all there is between you, it’s certainly a dislike the likes of which I’ve never seen.”

Wait a moment... Theo cocked his head. “Are you saying she no longer dislikes me?”

“It appears she has an entirely different attitude toward you now,” Trevelyan said.

“If one were to judge from those scorching looks,” Charlotte added.

Theo stopped in his tracks. “Do you think...she *likes* me?”

Charlotte and Trevelyan turned to him as one.

“I don’t know if I’d go so far, but whatever ‘secret’ you told her last night had her so agitated she couldn’t see straight,” Charlotte said. “And then the way she tripped over her dress... she was completely flustered. Georgiana is usually one of the most controlled and confident people I know. What on earth did you say to her?”

“It’s called a secret for a reason,” he told Charlotte lightly, because there was no way he was telling them what he’d actually said. He started walking again, and they fell into step

beside him.

Charlotte pursed her lips. “Ridge. Georgiana Milford is not someone you should trifle with.”

He frowned.

He’d trifled with women before, as they had trifled with him.

This... Was it...?

No.

That wasn’t what this was. He knew that damn well, deep in his gut. Nor did he wish to trifle with someone like her.

She was...*important.*

Yet, after what he’d whispered to her last night, she might think trifling with her was exactly what he was doing.

He needed to set her straight. If she was nearby, he’d go to her right now. But she was off fishing with the rest of the party. No telling when they’d be back.

“I’m *not* trifling with her,” he told Charlotte, his voice serious enough that both she and Trevelyan stared at him in surprise.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you sound so sincere,” Trevelyan said.

Theo huffed out a breath and cast his eyes heavenward. “Thanks.”

They’d reached the edge of the bowling green and were venturing into the lightly wooded area beyond. Birds chirped overhead, and in the distance, Theo could hear the babbling of a stream running over rocks.

“Then what are your intentions, exactly?” Charlotte asked.

“You sound like a doting parent protecting an innocent, the way you’re interrogating me,” he said.

“I’m her friend and technically her companion while she’s here. I assured her parents I would not allow anything untoward to happen to her.”

“Oh, I think Miss Milford is perfectly capable of taking care

of herself,” he said.

“I agree,” Charlotte said. “But...” She hesitated. “I fear her judgment might be clouded in this matter.”

There it was again, the implication that Georgiana might actually *like* him. God. Could it be possible?

And if she didn’t hate him...

He realized with desperate certainty that he wanted her to like him. Perhaps more desperately than he’d ever wanted *anyone* to like him.

He swallowed hard.

“Ridge.” Charlotte stopped again, reaching out to grasp his forearm. “Please, Ridge. Promise me you won’t hurt her.”

“I—” His voice broke, and he tried again. “I want nothing less than to hurt her, Charlotte. I promise you that. I would never deliberately do so.”

She gazed at him for a moment, then let him go. “I believe you,” she said softly.

The question was, did Theo believe himself?

...

Georgiana was in excellent spirits. She had caught two fat trout today, and while Lord Merrick had also caught two, they weren’t as large as hers. Everyone else had reeled in one, except for Lord Hawkins, who had altogether failed.

A part of her—the innocent-debutante-of-the-ton part—acknowledged that she was truly wicked to be delighted in the viscount’s misfortune. Then again, another part of her—the devil, or as the Duke of Desborough might say, the minx—felt it was justified. She knew all the fawning attention Viscount Hawkins had bestowed on her throughout the day had nothing to do with her as a person and everything to do with her overflowing coffers. The source of his devotion was patently obvious. The man was tiresome.

She’d come across Desborough before dinner, once again in

the conservatory. She and Charlotte had been taking tea at the table while Desborough was deep in conversation with Lord Merrick between the two rows of plants. A servant had walked past carrying a tray covered with plates of cakes and biscuits. As he passed, the young man seemed to trip over his own feet, sending the confections flying in every direction.

Merrick had been furious. He'd snapped at the poor, horrified servant, calling him clumsy, stupid, and an embarrassment, and had turned his back and stormed out after declaring proper disciplinary action would be taken. Meanwhile, Desborough had knelt beside the youth and helped him clean the scattered debris. Georgiana sipped her tea and talked to Charlotte, pretending not to pay any attention to the drama. When Desborough and the servant stood, the duke had given the trembling younger man's shoulder a comforting squeeze and spoken to him in a low, reassuring voice. Georgiana had to strain to hear, but she thought he'd said he'd put a word in with the butler on the youth's behalf.

It was a rare, unexpected kindness, and it shocked her. She would have expected every other person in this house to assist and comfort a servant before the Duke of Desborough.

The Merricks' cook had prepared the trout they brought home, and it had been delicious. As the ladies gathered in the drawing room after dinner, Miss Roundtree and Miss Kendall had clamored for another evening of games—clearly the two younger women were eager for more kissing—but Lady Merrick said she had a special surprise in store for all of them.

“What is it?” Miss Roundtree pleaded. “Do tell!”

Lady Merrick wasn't able to contain her excitement. She clasped her hands at her chest. “We've brought Mrs. Franco up from London to sing for us!”

Miss Roundtree squealed. Charlotte exclaimed, “Oh my goodness,” and Miss Kendall declared, “Mrs. Franco is the best singer in the world!”

Indeed, Mrs. Franco was quite famous. She had performed at Vauxhall Gardens for the Prince Regent and on the London stage, and by all accounts was sought after throughout the

world.

“How wonderful,” Georgiana said. “What a coup!”

“Not really.” Lady Merrick leaned forward and spoke in a conspiratorial voice. “Her husband is Lord Merrick’s second cousin’s husband’s brother. But pray don’t tell anyone—especially you, Evie. Mama and Papa would have the vapors if they knew Merrick was in any way connected to someone who *performed on the stage*.”

She said “performed on the stage” like it was some horrific, scandalous thing, and it actually *was*. While it was perfectly acceptable to engage in torrid affairs with people who performed for others, members of the beau monde were loath to connect themselves permanently to such vulgar society.

Now, Georgiana sat in the back row of the chairs that had been lined up in the music room, enjoying Mrs. Franco’s dulcet tones. She had a velvety quality to her voice, the high notes smooth and seductive rather than sharp and shrill.

The Duke of Desborough had disappeared after dinner, and Georgiana had been unaccountably dismayed that he’d chosen to abstain from the evening’s activities.

Perhaps he was still trying to avoid her.

Clearly, she’d given up all pretense of trying to avoid him.

Even when she *had* been avoiding him, she hadn’t been able to stop herself from studying him from a distance.

She wanted to speak with him alone again. He needed to be chastised for daring to whisper such arousing, scintillating—*No! Those words are completely incorrect!*—such *inappropriate* things into her ear last night.

Then she wanted to ask him how his day had been at the quiet house with only Lord Trevelyan and Charlotte for company. The three of them were great friends, so she imagined it had been lovely. There were times as she’d been fishing today when she’d been surrounded by people that she’d privately wished she’d stayed back at Elder Abbey. Her first rationalization, of course, was that she wanted to be with Charlotte. Charlotte *was* her best friend.

But she knew very well that although she preferred Charlotte's company over most anyone else's, she'd felt the separation from the duke even more sharply.

Mrs. Franco finished her song and took a sip of wine as Georgiana and the others clapped vigorously. The musicians struck up another tune, this one far jauntier than the last, and Mrs. Franco beamed and then began to sing again, this time swaying side to side with the rhythm of the music and casting flirtatious glances at the man playing the violin. Georgiana wondered if that was the husband Lady Merrick had mentioned... She had a feeling it wasn't.

She glanced around, her gaze snagging on the door. A bit of air might be nice. She was sitting in the back row, and no one would notice if she slipped out.

She did just that, closing the door to the music room quietly. The house behind her was silent—the Merricks had invited the servants to watch the performance, and most of them were in the music room enjoying Mrs. Franco's performance along with everyone else.

There was a kind of peace in the silence. Georgiana picked a direction and walked just for the pleasure of meandering through the house alone. Opening a door, she found herself in a dark corridor that ended at the kitchen. The vast room was dimly lit now that all the dinner activity had died down, and a single kitchen maid who'd been dozing in a chair by the hearth jumped up when Georgiana opened the door. "Can I help you, miss?"

"Oh no, thank you. Sorry to disturb you." Georgiana closed the door before she bothered the girl any more. Turning, she walked back through the corridor and out into the entry hall, which branched off into the drawing room, the ballroom, the card room, a retiring room, and of course the conservatory, which tied with the library, Georgiana thought, if there were to be a competition between her favorite rooms in this lovely house.

The library. It was a perfect space, with its floor-to-ceiling shelves brimming with books and its cozy chairs.

Suddenly, fetching a book—perhaps an old favorite—and curling up to read in that comfortable blue chair for a while sounded like just the thing.

She went upstairs and swung open the door to the library.

The first thing she noticed was that someone was sitting in her chair.

The second thing she noticed was that it was the Duke of Desborough who turned toward her, an inquiring, perfect brow raised.

She gripped the edge of the door as her skin prickled with awareness.

“Good evening, Your Grace.”

Chapter Thirteen

It had been difficult for Theo to keep his eyes off Georgiana Milford tonight. Like the other ladies, her dress was white, but the gossamer silk of it, along with the white demi-train trimmed with a delicate silver, brought out the healthy glow of her skin and the golden shine of her upswept hair.

He'd wanted to take that dress off her. He couldn't stop imagining having her beneath him.

So it was out of pure self-preservation that he'd left the dining room after one glass of port. He'd escaped to the library, intending to spend the evening by himself. Another night of revelry like the previous one might kill him like the tomato hadn't. Or it might reveal him for the infatuated fool he was starting to admit to himself he was.

Beautiful Georgiana Milford, with her sharp tongue and her uncanny way of making him loosen his guard. Somehow, the woman had burrowed under his skin and seemed determined to take up residence there.

The man Theo was last month, or even last week, would have wanted her gone. But the new Theo, the one of tonight, craved her proximity.

The problem was, he well knew the danger of that, which was why he'd escaped to the safety of the library. Except it had turned out to be not so safe after all.

"Miss Milford," he said now, closing his book and rising from his chair. "Have you found our hosts' evening entertainments lacking?"

"No, not at all," she said airily, stepping inside and closing the door. So focused was he on their sudden, intimate privacy, he hardly heard her say, "In fact, Mrs. Franco is extraordinary."

"Then why are you here?"

She seemed to hesitate a moment, then shrugged. "I suppose I just needed some air." At his skeptical look, she added, "And

a good book.” She moved closer to him. “What are you reading?”

He was suddenly grateful it wasn't *The Taming of the Shrew*, which he'd almost picked up for a reread this evening. Instead, he showed her the copy of *Romeo and Juliet*.

“Ah,” she murmured. “The two ill-fated lovers. Have you read it before?”

“A few times.” He laid the volume down. “But I had the— Well, I'm not sure *pleasure* is the right word. Perhaps *experience* is better—of seeing Robert Coates play Romeo at the Haymarket Theatre last year. Since he made a mockery of the production—wearing clothing studded with diamonds, changing poor Romeo's lines to ‘improve’ the play, offering his snuff-box to members of the audience, et cetera—I decided to reread the final scene between Romeo and Juliet in its pure form as the Bard intended.”

“How depressing,” Georgiana said. “I'm sure Mr. Coates's performance was much livelier.”

He made a derisive sound. “If you enjoy the dramatics of Romeo dragging Juliet's lifeless corpse around the stage before drinking his poison and staggering in overdramatic death throes for ten minutes before having the audience call out for him to ‘die again, Romeo!’ and watching him lurch about the stage all over again...” He raised his hands as if in defeat. “Well, the audience loved it. But when he called out, ‘Have I done it well?’ to us at the end, I admit to shouting back at him, ‘You are more of a tragedy than this play!’”

Georgiana laughed.

“But the Prince Regent was also in attendance that night, and he thought it was magnificently funny.” Theo shrugged.

“I'm sure he did. That certainly sounds like the kind of thing that would amuse the Prince Regent.”

“So,” he said, catching himself after a moment of watching how the lamplight enhanced the blond streaks in her hair. “I heard you caught the biggest fish of the day.”

She gave him a smug smile. “So I did.”

Competitive little minx. “Well done.”

“Thank you.” She turned and approached the nearest bookshelf, tilting her head to read the titles on the spines of the closest books. “And how did you spend your day?”

“Woke up late,” he said.

She laughed quietly. “As usual.”

“Then...” He damned well wasn’t going to tell her about Charlotte and Trevelyan’s warnings about her. “Went for a walk with the earl and countess.”

“That sounds nice.”

“It was. Trevelyan and I spent the afternoon in Merrick’s study.”

“Doing what?”

He hesitated, but somehow, she’d once again loosened his guard, and he couldn’t find a reason not to tell her. “He helped me to narrow my objectives for the improvements to Clairwood Park for the next several months.” They’d also discussed a next project for Sebastian and decided that Theo would ask him to coordinate moving the flock to graze the much-neglected northern part of the estate.

Georgiana turned to him, unmasked curiosity in her expression. “What are your goals, specifically?”

“If I tell you, will you try to thwart them?” he asked. Her father most certainly would.

She scowled. “Of course not. Well...unless they are goals that would undermine my family.”

“They are not.”

“I didn’t think they were. Lord Trevelyan would never agree to assist you with a scheme like that.”

Right. Because Theo was the Duke of Despots and Trevelyan was the Lord of Perfection. It was amazing how a man who was so unkempt, even piratical, in appearance, could engender so much respect.

But Theo understood why. Trevelyan's actions proved his integrity.

Theo would never hope to aim for that kind of adulation. He just wanted the people surrounding him not to despise him. Surely that wasn't too much to ask.

He sighed and agreed with Georgiana. "No, he wouldn't."

"So, tell me your goals for Clairwood Park." She turned away to continue to peruse the volumes lining the shelves.

"The main objective is to bring the estate into profitability."

"How do you intend to do that?"

"I've already made some progress in that regard. The fields have been plowed and tilled, and the crops have been planted. The next key period will be the harvest. How to distribute the work and profit evenly." Unlike his father had. "I need more workers. Many left during my father's tenure as the duke."

They both were silent for a moment. Theo had no doubt she was thinking the same thing he was—the reason those families who'd lived on that land for generations had moved was that his father had been a horrible landlord.

"How do you intend to do that?" Georgiana asked.

Most of those old tenants hadn't gone far—in fact, they'd gone right next door to Milford's estate. Theo's first thought had been to lure them back, but that would only generate more vitriol from his neighbor. "Trevelyan and I were working on that today. And not only how to bring workers in, but how to keep them." Theo clasped his hands behind his back. "Trevelyan gave me a variety of ideas to create goodwill."

Still studying the book spines, she raised her brows. "Goodwill, hm?"

"Yes. One idea was for me to hold a ball this winter."

She glanced over her shoulder at him, her eyes twinkling. "A winter ball at the ducal residence? Now that's something I cannot begin to imagine."

"He says I should invite everyone who lives within a twenty-

mile radius.”

She let out a feminine huff of laughter.

“That includes your family, as well.” She went still at that, and he gave a self-deprecating laugh. “I know, I know. Your family wouldn’t come. I could only hope that they won’t convince the entire countryside not to attend.”

Georgiana sighed. “My father usually would warn people against it. For their own well-being, of course.”

“Of course,” Theo said mildly.

“I would never be able to convince him to go to such a party,” she said. “And I doubt I’d ever convince him to allow me to attend. But perhaps I might dissuade him from speaking so ill of you throughout the countryside.”

Well, that was a surprise. Perhaps her opinion of Theo was softening. “That would be helpful,” he said. “If he continues to do so, my ball will have sparse attendance, if anyone comes at all.”

“I will ask him not to discourage others from attending,” she said.

Theo gave her a skeptical look. “Do you have that kind of influence over him?”

“I have quite a bit of influence over him, actually.” When he raised a surprised brow, she explained, “Before I was born, he wished desperately that I would be a son. When I was not, he was predictably disappointed. That was until I was fifteen and proved to him that I could be valuable to him in his business endeavors.”

“How is that?”

She gave him a self-satisfied smile. “I understand fashion better than he does. The power looms he invented have changed the lives of countless people—we now have access to a wide variety of quickly manufactured fabrics we wouldn’t have dreamed of having thirty years ago. But now, with me as an advisor, he knows what fabrics his factories must produce and what styles his dressmakers and tailors must design for

optimal profit.”

“I see.” Curious about how Georgiana filled her days, Theo asked, “So do you collaborate with him often?”

“Almost daily. I have my own office in London, and I work there several days a week. When we are in residence at Norton House, I work in my study there.”

“How extraordinary.” He shook his head. “I cannot imagine what your future husband will think of that.”

She made a dismissive noise. “Future husband? Unlikely. I have no plans of giving up my life to some penny-grabbing fortune hunter who will steal my inheritance.”

“Oh, come now,” he chastised. “All men aren’t fortune hunters.”

She sighed. “Unfortunately, my inheritance is so enormous that I have yet to meet a man who has the ability to look beyond my piles of wealth.”

Georgiana’s blunt discussion of her “piles of wealth” was a little surprising, but he supposed that the richest heiress in England must have her eccentricities. He frowned. “Are you certain of that?”

“Have you *seen* Lord Hawkins?” she asked.

Yes, he had. The man’s greed was written all over his face whenever Georgiana was in his presence. “Not everyone is like him.”

“If you say so.” She sounded completely unconvinced. “In any case, I am unwilling to hand over my wealth to some man who will use it to control me. The mere thought of it is despicable.”

“And yet you allow your parents to control you,” he mused.

She blinked at him. “What do you mean?”

“You yourself said they’d forcibly remove you from the premises if they knew I was here, didn’t you? That is control.”

“But...” She shook her head, a frown line appearing between her brows. “No. It’s not the same.”

“Isn’t it?” he prodded. “And why do you attend so many society functions with your mother?”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “My mother hopes for me to find ‘true love.’ She feels that I will never be completely happy if I don’t. She’s not trying to control me. On the contrary—she’s helping me.”

“Yet you have no intention of forming a permanent bond with any of the gentlemen you meet at these functions.”

“That wouldn’t be the case if they could see past my wealth.”

He scoffed. “Nevertheless, you allow your parents to parade you about society like a debutante ripe for the plucking.”

“Well, my father believes—” She broke off and threw up her hands. “You are very vexing, Your Grace. You know as well as I do that a parent’s control is quite different from a husband’s.”

“Do I?” he asked with a frown. He’d never really witnessed a lot of husbands—good ones, anyhow. He’d also never allowed his father to control him. After his mother was gone, Theo had returned to school and found ways to avoid his father until the man died.

Sebastian hadn’t been so lucky. That old guilt pierced him yet again.

“It seems to me,” he said, “that when we are speaking of young ladies, a father’s control is as absolute as a husband’s.”

“Not at all,” Georgiana argued. “It’s different because my father *loves* me.”

“And your husband wouldn’t?”

She blinked. “What?”

“Isn’t that the whole point of marriage? For the husband and wife to commit to loving each other for the rest of their lives?”

She stepped back against the bookshelf, hand to chest. “Are you a *romantic*, Your Grace?”

He laughed, low in his throat. “Now let’s not get carried away.”

She blew out a breath in mock relief. “Thank goodness.”

He took a step toward her. “But it makes me think—you’ve never been in love before, have you? If you had, you might have quite a different opinion of potential husbands.”

She gave him her haughtiest look. “That’s really none of your business, is it?” She straightened. “Now, I insist we cease speaking of such frivolous matters.”

So everlasting love was frivolous to her, was it?

She turned her back to him, facing the bookshelf again. “I’m here to find a book to read. Any recommendations?”

He came up to her, standing behind her as she pulled out a volume of middling length.

He shouldn’t stand so close, but damned if he could help himself. This near to her, he inhaled the scent of roses and remembered catching her in his arms last night and how he’d realized she was the perfect size to tuck against his body and rest his chin on the top of her head.

Tension crackled between them, and a low throb started deep within him. He looked at the title of the book she held: *Original Love-Letters*—

He let out a puff of laughter, but then he read the subtitle: *Between a Lady of Quality and a Person of Inferior Station*.

He raised a brow. “More ill-fated lovers?”

She quickly shoved the book back in and gave a shaky laugh. “I think tonight I would prefer a different topic.”

He took a deep breath, infusing his senses with her rosewater, and shuddered. Somehow she felt it, even though they weren’t touching. In response, he felt her body tense from top to bottom.

“No lovers, hm?”

“No. None. None at all. Perhaps an adventure? Or here—” She pointed at a book titled *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. “A history.”

“I think that particular history contained many lovers—illicit

ones, at that.”

She groaned, and the sound shot straight through him, vaporizing all thoughts of keeping his distance. All he wanted to do was be close to her. As close as he possibly could.

He moved another step toward her and stood a moment, soaking in her proximity. “Turn around,” he said softly.

She did, excruciatingly slowly.

When she was facing him, he ran a hand up her arm, over her long, white glove, over that warm, petal-soft part of her skin on her upper arm, then over that exquisite silver-trimmed silk cap sleeve. He skimmed her shoulder and touched her cheek. It was softer, sweeter than he could have ever imagined. Then, he slid his finger under her chin and tipped her face up to his.

Her eyes were a clear hazel. “Beautiful,” he whispered under his breath.

“Your Grace...” She shook her head slightly. “I... I hate you.”

That was the most unconvincing declaration of hate he’d ever heard.

“And yet you don’t, do you? Not anymore.” Keeping one finger under her chin, he touched his thumb to her plump lower lip. Pink as a rosebud.

“I...well, no, I don’t hate you,” she murmured. “But...you hate me, don’t you?” She sounded rather desperate, as if she were *hoping* he hated her. “You think I’m a shrew.”

“I might have thought that once. But now...” He had hundreds of thoughts about this amazing, confounding, stubborn, beautiful woman. But right now... “I think you’re a minx and a tease.”

A frown puckered her brow again. He smoothed it away with the fingertips of his free hand.

She narrowed her eyes. “I think *you’re* the tease.”

“How’s that?”

“That ‘secret’...those indecent, improper things you said to

me last night...”

“You mean how I was imagining us together? About how I couldn’t stop thinking about you?” His voice was husky as he spoke. He brushed his thumb over her lip, and he could feel the tremor roll through her.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“That wasn’t teasing. That was the truth.”

“Because you ate that horrid love-apple.”

“No. The tomato had nothing to do with it. I feel that way right now, and the tomato is no longer involved.”

She stared up at him. “Desb—” she began, but he pressed two fingers over her lips.

“No. That’s not who I am.”

That small furrow appeared on her forehead. “What then? Ridge?”

“Call me Theo.”

“Theo,” she murmured. “Is Theodore your given name?”

He huffed out a small laugh. “Theophilus.”

She arched one blond eyebrow, but her eyes twinkled. “*Theophilus?*”

“My father gave me that name.” He wanted to kiss the edge of that raised brow. Badly. “Pretentious ass.”

She laughed softly. “Well, I’m not one to mock others’ pretensions. *My* father named me after the king.”

Another pretentious ass. He wasn’t going to say that out loud, though. Not when her eyes danced and her breaths emerged in light gasps from her slightly parted lips.

The thought of her father, the textile king of England, made him remember the pure folly of getting close to her. Still, he couldn’t bring himself to pull away.

“Georgiana,” he murmured. He’d been dying to say her name again. It felt so good on his tongue. “May I call you Georgiana?”

He waited, watching a dozen emotions flicker over her face as she considered his request. Finally, she gave a slow nod.

He lifted her wrist and tugged at the fingers of her glove. When all five of them were loosened, he pulled the supple fabric slowly down over her arm. Sparks seemed to crackle between them as he slid the silk over her pale skin until her hand was exposed. Tossing the glove aside, he laced his fingers with her delicate, feminine ones, brought her hand up to his lips, and pressed a kiss to each of her knuckles.

His chest was tight, his body strung taut. He wanted her so goddamn much.

She closed her eyes in a long blink, then looked up at him. They stared at each other for what felt like an eternity. Theo could gaze into her changeable eyes forever.

“One kiss,” he murmured, pulling her infinitesimally closer. “Just one.”

He waited, feeling like he was hanging on the edge of a cliff, anticipating the permission to step over and fall into heaven.

“Just one,” she agreed.

And *she* was the one who leaned forward that final, scant inch, tilting her head slightly before touching her lips to his.

Chapter Fourteen

When her lips brushed over his in the lightest caress, Theo nearly groaned aloud. He slid his fingers from her grip and flattened his hand over her back, pressing her closer to him while wrapping his other hand behind her neck and playing with the silky strands artfully curling from her coiffure.

Her lips were warmer, softer, sweeter than he could have imagined. And so timid...

Delight suffused him. Georgiana Milford put on such a worldly mask. Even last night she had pretended she was unaffected by all the talk of—and actual—kissing. He'd assumed she'd been kissed. But now—oh, this was new for her. She'd never done it before.

And he was damn grateful he would have the honor of being the one to show her how.

He pressed his lips to hers more firmly, kissing her with more urgency. After a second, she gave a small sigh and tentatively kissed him back, her arms slipping around him.

He firmed his hand over her neck. To his eternal satisfaction, her arms tugged him closer, her lips brazenly exploring his mouth.

The way she touched him lit him on fire. The way his body reacted to her was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. He needed to be closer to her. As close as he could possibly be.

A clamoring voice started in the back of his mind, repeating, *Danger! Danger!* But she pulled him even closer, and he doused the warning and sank deeper, his body straining for more.

She whimpered, and he sucked in a breath at the erotic sound, then skimmed his tongue over her top lip, making her gasp.

He kissed her and tasted her, and then she was tasting him, too, at first with tentative little licks but quickly losing that timidity. He loved how receptive she was, how quick she

learned, her boldness.

He'd take more. And more and more and *more*, if she'd let him. He moved his hand from her neck to cup her chin, reveling in the dewy skin of her jaw as he tilted her head so he could coax his tongue between her lips, desperate for more of her taste.

One of her hands slid around to his front. He held his hand over hers, encouraging her to touch him, to explore, helping her slip her fingers under his waistcoat. Soon, she was exploring on her own, and she was a woman who touched with purpose, like she knew what she wanted and what he needed. Her hands on him. All over him. Everywhere.

His cock was rock hard, and he pressed his body tighter to hers, partially to relieve its demands, partially to show her what she did to him.

Suddenly, she yanked back, breathing hard. He stared at her, shocked and aroused and completely, utterly under her spell. She stared back, eyes wide and dark, cheeks flushed a beautiful pink.

“Oh God,” she whispered, horror dawning in her expression. “What have I done?”

...

Over a year ago, Georgiana and Charlotte had been preparing for a party together, and Georgiana had asked Charlotte if she and Lord Trevelyan had ever kissed.

Georgiana would never forget the starry look in Charlotte's eyes when she'd answered in the affirmative. She hadn't understood it then.

Now, she did.

A part of her wanted to kiss the Duke of Desborough—Theo—for the rest of eternity. She would never tire of the way his lips stroked over hers, how the soft feel of them seemed to infuse heat and energy into her very bones.

But another part of her was appalled. Even as she delighted

in the kiss, that part of her started complaining, growing so loud that she couldn't push it away.

And then, it had finally permeated her sensibilities.

This is folly! You must stop this at once, before you abandon reason once and for all.

As soon as she jerked back, she saw the change in him. Mere inches from her, Theo's passionate warmth drained away, leaving the cool and aloof Duke of Desborough in its wake.

She was still panting slightly, and sparks continued to detonate through her veins. Clearly, it took her far longer than it took him to bring her body back under control.

"That was a mistake," she said.

His face was utterly emotionless. "Of course it was. My apologies."

"It won't happen again," she insisted.

"Definitely not," he said in a flat tone.

She recognized this duke. The one who pretended nothing affected him, that he was as cold and hard as ice. What a lie. He'd been just as affected as she had. She looked into his detached eyes and narrowed her own.

"For heaven's sake," she snapped. "You don't need to overdo it."

"Overdo what?" he asked.

"Your attempt at pretending disinterest."

He raised a questioning brow.

"You do that. Every time someone says or does something you don't like, you become..." She frowned, unable to come up with the exact word for it. "Duke-ish."

He scoffed. "*Duke-ish?*"

"Yes. Imperious. Uncaring. Detached. As if you are so far above we mortal beings, we are worth less than the dust beneath your holy feet."

He crossed his arms over his chest, but his expression

remained perfectly composed. “Is that so?”

“That is exactly so.” She crossed her own arms. “But I see through you, *Your Grace*. I don’t believe your act for one second.”

A muscle twitched in his jaw—a tiny clue that he was not some imperious statue looming over her, but she saw it, and it made her frown melt away.

A clacking noise sounded out in the corridor, and Georgiana swung her head around. “What—”

But she stopped mid-question because it was now clear exactly what the sound was. Someone walking, coming closer, on the wooden floor in heeled shoes.

Oh dear. She turned around as if she was perusing the books, and just in time, too, because the door was opening. She glanced—hopefully casually—back toward the library entrance as Lord Hawkins stepped inside.

Ugh. Lord Hawkins. Of all people.

She looked over at Theo, who appeared perfectly composed in his chair—how on earth had he reached it so quickly?—opening the volume of *Romeo and Juliet* and then glancing disinterestedly over his shoulder. “Good evening, Hawkins.”

Lord. His voice... The smooth, masculine sound of it launched butterflies in her stomach.

“Desborough.” Hawkins didn’t spare Theo a glance—just looked over at her, a concerned frown wrinkling his brow. “Ah, there you are, Miss Milford. When I saw you’d left the performance, I grew concerned.”

“Your concern was unwarranted, Lord Hawkins. As you can see, I am perfectly fine.”

That may not have been the right thing to say. She knew she looked... Well, she didn’t look “perfectly fine,” that was for certain. Because she wasn’t. Not only was her coiffure askew, her breaths short, and her skin prickling, but she also felt lightheaded and completely off balance.

Unsurprisingly, Hawkins appeared unconvinced. He looked

from her to Theo, who gazed back at him with a flat expression.

“Yes, well...” Hawkins took another step deeper into the room, making the point that even if his company wasn’t wanted, he was clearly unwilling to leave her and Theo alone again. “You look somewhat...feverish.”

She *felt* feverish. “As I said,” she said coldly, “I am perfectly fine.”

“Well, good. I am glad to hear it.” He shifted from foot to foot. “Did you dislike Mrs. Franco’s performance? I thought it was magnificent.”

“It was magnificent. I just needed some...air.”

Theo was looking at her, brow quirked sardonically. She shot him a scowl.

“Air?” Hawkins coughed. “In the library?”

She didn’t need to explain herself to this man. So she didn’t. Instead, she turned around and began perusing the spines again.

But Hawkins went on, intrepid fortune hunter that he was. “It feels rather...oppressive in here. Perhaps you’d like to take a turn about the garden instead, Miss Milford?”

Well, *that* was forward. He’d found her in a room alone with a gentleman, but that didn’t mean she’d go gallivanting about alone in the dark with *any* gentleman.

“No, thank you. I find the air pleasant in the library.” She took a deep inhalation of said air. “Paper...ink... So refreshing, don’t you think?”

“Er...no. Not really,” Hawkins said.

“What about you, Your Grace?” she asked, turning to Theo.

He looked at her with hooded eyes. “‘Refreshing’ is not quite the word I’d use. ‘*Exhilarating*,’ perhaps.”

Hawkins appeared confused. “Well... I have never found a library exhilarating, but to each his own, I suppose.”

Georgiana locked eyes with Theo.

“I daresay a library is one of the most exhilarating places of all,” Theo told him. “Where else can you find stacks of knowledge, the history of the world, along with endless tales of bravery, valor, danger, and love?”

Hawkins laughed uncomfortably. “Right. I see now. The books. Yes, I suppose books can be exhilarating, now and then.”

Neither Georgiana nor Theo responded to that.

Hawkins cleared his throat. “So. Now that the concert is over, everyone has retired to the card room. They’re dividing our numbers for games of whist. If you’d care to join them, Miss Milford, I’ll accompany you, but otherwise”—he turned an unconvinced gaze to the bookshelves—“perhaps I’ll search for a book to...er...exhilarate me.”

He had no intention of leaving her side for the rest of the evening. How tedious.

Georgiana could only think of one way out of this.

She yawned, covering her mouth. “Oh my, it seems I’m rather tired. Catching everyone’s dinner was quite exhausting. I think I ought to retire for the evening.”

She rose, only then noticing that her glove was on the floor and her right hand was utterly naked. She glanced at Hawkins, who was looking between the glove and her bare hand. Oh dear.

Theo retrieved the glove and held it out to her. “Seems you might have misplaced this, Miss Milford,” he drawled.

She snatched it from him. “Thank you, Your Grace. I...took it off...earlier, you know, because I, uhm...didn’t want any ink from the books to transfer to the fabric. These are made of the finest silk of the Orient, you know.”

Theo made a sympathetic sound. “Well, then, I’m sure you wouldn’t want to ruin them.”

“Definitely not.” *Instead I’ll just throw them on the floor where they might be stepped on...ugh.* She swallowed down a

groan.

“I’ll accompany you to your room,” Lord Hawkins said.

“That’s not—”

“As will I,” Theo said.

So, flanked by the two men, she walked down the corridor to her room on the opposite wing of the house. The walk felt endless, but they finally reached her door.

After they’d all exchanged their good nights, she closed the door on them both, then sagged against it.

She raised her hand to her lips, touched them gently, and sighed.

She’d been kissed tonight for the first time in her life.

It was a mistake. It was reckless and irrational and imprudent.

But still...she’d been wonderfully, sensually, beautifully kissed. She couldn’t believe she’d expected to go through life without ever experiencing such a thing. How foolish of her.

She called for Anne, who helped her undress, chattering the whole time about the wonderful Mrs. Franco and what a beautiful voice she had. When Anne finally left, Georgiana lay in her bed under the cool sheets, imagining Theo coming into her room and finishing what they’d started.

It was only a fantasy. The rational part of her reassured her that if he dared attempt any such thing, she’d throw him out on his well-formed backside.

Still, the fantasy gripped her, making her whole body ache.

Chapter Fifteen

Theo didn't go downstairs to play card games with Hawkins and the others. Instead, he went straight to his assigned bedchamber, where, for the rest of the night, he couldn't stop himself from thinking about going to Georgiana.

Damn. He *wanted* to go to her. His body was clamoring for him to go.

As infuriating as he found her, he was inexplicably drawn to her. He wanted her. He wanted her in his bed, certainly, but it was more than that. Every inch of the beautiful, frustrating, unique, impossible minx fascinated him.

As he lay awake in bed, imagining her lying in her own bed next door—was she thinking of him, too?—something occurred to him that had his heart nearly leaping out of his chest.

He was falling for Georgiana Milford. The woman he must never, ever kiss again.

...

The Merricks had planned a special outing for the following day. This time, the guests would ride a few miles on horseback across the High Peak. Their path would end at the entrance to the cavern called The Devil's Arse—whose name set the younger ladies atwitter—the wonders of which they'd explore before having another picnic and returning to Elder Abbey.

“This is only for the boldest adventurers among us,” Merrick had warned. “Not for the faint of heart!”

Refusing to be dissuaded by his ominous tone, every single guest in attendance had eagerly joined the party.

Theo walked with Georgiana out to the stables. She looked delicious, as always. Merrick had urged them to dress for the occasion—they were going underground to explore a cave, after all, so one could expect to emerge from the place covered with a certain amount of unpleasant grime.

Georgiana, however, appeared as if she had stepped from a fashion plate. She wore a deep-purple riding habit cinched tight around her little waist with flowing skirts below. A fine beaver hat embellished with a tassel and a purple ostrich feather sat upon her head, and black boots laced and fringed with the same purple color hugged her feet. Theo gave a low laugh when he saw her. “*That* is your chosen costume for our descent underground?”

She looked down at herself, then back up at him. A line appeared between her brows as she studied him critically. “What about you? That coat is of superfine Spanish merino wool—not exactly the chosen fabric of underground adventurers—and those boots are calfskin leather from France...very rare to find in England these days, as I’m sure you’re aware. They also appear as if they’ve never touched actual soil.”

He could only smile at her. “My valet is excellent. He would never allow any of my clothing to appear as if it had touched *actual* soil.”

“Obviously,” she muttered.

Both content in their overdressed-for-the-occasion state, Theo and Georgiana walked side by side to join the comparatively shabbily dressed group assembled at the stable entryway. Merrick gave them a selection of horses to choose from, and Georgiana chose the same gelding she’d ridden to the shoot.

The ride to the cavern was a peaceful one. Georgiana and Theo rode side by side on the Castleton Road behind Charlotte and Trevelyan, who glanced back at him with his signature scowl no less than three times. Occasionally, a murmur went through the line of riders as their hosts pointed out various landmarks along the way.

They rode through Castleton, a picturesque village tucked at the base of a hill topped by the crumbling ruins of a castle, and turned down a narrow path lined on one side by a stream and the other by tiny, thatched miners’ cottages. The path slowly descended into a ravine, the limestone walls growing taller on

each side before they stopped at a vast archway surrounded by moss-and-ivy-dappled cliffs that rose in a sheer face two hundred feet high on three sides.

Birds swooped in and out of the gorge, their calls echoing as everyone dismounted and hobbled their horses along the stone wall bordering the stream. They handed their hats and bonnets to the servants to keep, as Merrick had informed them headwear would get in the way of the cavern's intermittently low ceilings.

As they approached the huge, arching mouth, it emitted a loud, gurgling, flatulent noise that stopped everyone in their tracks.

"Well, that clarifies why the place is called the Devil's Arse," Theo observed after a marked silence.

Worthington grimaced as if he smelled something rotten, though the damp, mossy scent surrounding them hadn't changed. "What made that dreadful noise?"

"A river runs through the cave at various intervals," Merrick explained. "The place where it makes that particular noise is a sinkhole leading to another level of caverns deeper underground. It does sound rather provocative, doesn't it?"

Servants, who'd followed behind with a cartful of supplies, lit candles for the men to carry, and Merrick told each man to partner with a woman.

From the corner of his eye, Theo saw Hawkins bearing down on Georgiana. He stepped closer to her, muttering, "You're with me," and wrapping her arm in his own.

Georgiana arched a brow at him but accepted his arm without complaint, and Theo's heart—What the hell was happening to him?—executed a strange little flip in his chest.

He spared a glance in Hawkins's direction to see the viscount giving him a rude look. With a scowl, he turned away and approached Miss Roundtree instead.

Theo shook his head. Georgiana was too good for the likes of Hawkins. She knew exactly what he was after. She'd been so chilly with him, Theo would have expected him to have

understood he had no chance with her by now. But the man was either stupid or persistent. Or both.

Stepping under the arching entryway that spanned the length of one cliff face to the other and rose to at least sixty feet high, they entered a deep cavern, an immense, sloping room with its walls and slightly curved ceiling made of smooth, solid rock. The cavern was terraced in long rows that extended from the cave mouth into the dark depths. Theo's group had entered on the highest terrace, and working men, women, and children, their clothes tattered and stained, were scattered across the lower ones, huddled in groups and operating contraptions that twisted and stretched long lengths of rope. The groups deeper in the cave worked by the dim yellow flames of tallow candles that emitted a meaty scent into the air.

Merrick turned to address them. "Once upon a time, robbers, smugglers, and violent knaves dwelt in this cave, but now it's occupied by the ropemakers who supply the miners."

Judging by the cluster of tiny stone hovels on Theo's left that rose barely to his hip and the fire rings scattered throughout the cavern with the accompanying black patches on the ceiling, it appeared as if these people not only engaged in their ropemaking enterprise here, but they also lived here. They kept their focus on their tasks, paying no heed to the group of aristocrats who had just entered their space.

Following Merrick, Theo, Georgiana, and the rest descended deeper into the cavern. The path was muddy, steep, and wet, the ceiling gradually lowering until they had to crouch low to continue on. Georgiana clung to him but remained steady on her feet and didn't slip. "These boots are specially made for rough terrain," she informed him at one point, and they were indeed doing a fine job of keeping her safe.

Candlelight flickered off the rocky formations and stubby stalactites growing out from the wet walls and damp ceiling. The sounds of burbling water echoed around them.

Georgiana shuddered and pressed closer to him. "It sounds so eerie."

"It does."

The ceiling grew higher again, and they stopped in a gloomy chamber with a flat floor and walls, dark except for the various flickering candles whose lights didn't extend into its blackest corners or its impossibly high-seeming ceiling. The temperature had grown frigid compared to the sunny summer morning outside.

"This chamber is called the Bell House." Merrick's voice had gone low and dark as if to match the mood of the place.

They stopped on a low mound of silt at the edge of a lake, the size of which was indiscernible, since within a few feet the water disappeared into darkness. At the water's edge, his face flickering yellow in the tallow candle he held, a man of short stature and very curly black hair stood guard over a small coffin-shaped boat. Running his fingers through his long beard, he studied the entering group with round, dark eyes.

Merrick spoke to the man in a low voice, then turned to the rest of them as they crowded round. "All right. Two at once."

Georgiana blinked. "Two at once for *what*, exactly?"

Merrick gestured to the coffin boat. "Into the boat. Our guide will pull us down the River Styx two at a time."

"The River *Styx*?" Miss Roundtree wrapped her arms around herself. "The river leading to the Underworld?"

"Exactly," Merrick said ominously.

"Will we need to put coins on our eyes?" Charlotte joked.

"Not *this* time." Merrick was enjoying his role as the doomsayer. "But likely the next."

"And will we ever be able to return from our journey into the darkness?" Miss Kendall whispered.

Merrick wagged his brows and held his candle beneath his chin, making his face waver unnaturally. "Perhaps," he said, then, after a short pause, added, "Perhaps *not*."

"Oh my!" Miss Roundtree stared at the coffin-shaped boat in horror.

"You're saying the only way to proceed is via this tiny little

boat?” Georgiana regarded it skeptically.

“That’s right.”

“And...we must climb into the boat with our partners?” Miss Kendall asked, wide-eyed.

“Yes. I paired each man with a woman in the event you ladies become frightened. Your partner will gallantly protect you from whatever dangers might lurk within.”

Theo nearly rolled his eyes. Merrick was enjoying this far too much. The two younger ladies, in particular, looked terrified. Hawkins was rubbing the small of Miss Roundtree’s back gently, as if to calm her nerves.

Merrick continued. “When you are in the boat, you must lie down flat lest your head scrape the ceiling.”

Miss Kendall looked, aghast, at Worthington, no doubt imagining lying down beside the man so close to him it would be as if *they were in bed*. “Oh my,” she breathed. “That’s *scandalous*.”

“I sincerely hope there are no gossips at this party,” Georgiana muttered. “If there are, we’ll all be ruined.”

Merrick heard her. “Not at all. I trust everyone here.” He scanned the group, frowning. “No one would gossip about such a paltry thing—and, indeed, a requirement for us to explore the cave—would they?”

There were murmurings of “No, no, of course not” among the party, but Trevelyan shook his head. “Not good enough. We must all make a vow to that effect.”

“Yes!” Charlotte agreed. “Whatever happens at the house party *stays* at the house party! Let’s all agree to it, shall we?”

“Oh, let’s do,” exclaimed Miss Roundtree. “After the parlor games...and now this... Goodness! If we are given the assurance that everyone will keep their word on their honor, our hands won’t feel so tightly bound by society’s constraints.”

One by one, they all swore to keep their silence. Theo’s turn came about halfway through. “I pledge,” he repeated, “that I

will not spread gossip—salacious or otherwise—about anything that has happened or will happen henceforth at Lord and Lady Merrick’s house party. I will not speak of things that occurred here or will occur here until such date as I depart from Elder Abbey. Upon my honor, I promise to keep this vow.”

When everyone had finished making their declarations, they all turned back to the coffin boat.

Theo tightened his hand on Georgiana’s arm. “We’ll go first,” he announced.

Georgiana turned to him, the glower on her face evident in the flickering candlelight. “We will, will we?”

“We will,” he said mildly, leading her to the pond’s edge. The cave-dweller guide tucked his candle between his teeth and went into the pond to help steady the boat, the water lapping at his hips. Lady Merrick and Charlotte stepped forward to help Georgiana while Theo knelt and held its edge to keep it steady—it was an old, wobbly wooden structure. He hoped it was seaworthy enough to get them where they needed to go.

After Georgiana was securely reclining on the bed of straw lining the bottom of the boat, Theo went in, making a show of lying down as closely as possible to the edge opposite the one Georgiana was pressed to.

Still, the boat was literally the size of a coffin, so it was inevitable they touched. Her arm, the curve of her hip, her leg—all of them pressed against his body. He closed his eyes and gritted out, “Ready.”

Merrick handed him his candle. “Godspeed, friend! See you on the other side.”

“Now I take ye down the River Styx.” The cave-dweller held the rope tied to the boat securely wrapped in his hand and started to pull them forward. “To observe the terrors and beauties of the underworld.”

Soon, they disappeared into blackness, the only pinpricks of light coming from Theo’s and the guide’s candles. Theo

reached for Georgiana's gloved hand and entwined her fingers with his own.

God, that felt good.

"Watch yer head, lest the god of the underworld decides to skim it off for ye," the cave-dweller intoned.

Georgiana pressed closer to him. She smelled like roses, a bright burst of sweetness in this dim, earthy place. He squeezed her hand as they watched the ceiling drop lower and lower still. He reached up and skimmed his gloved fingertips along the damp, flat stone, mere inches above their noses.

He turned his head and ran his lips over her ear. "Are you frightened?"

"No," she said. He wasn't quite sure he believed her. "I'm cold, mostly."

He reached his free arm around her and tugged her flush against him. "Take your warmth from me, then."

She turned toward him, pressing her body more tightly against him, and Theo closed his eyes. This was far too erotic a position for the middle of the day among a party of their peers.

But at this moment, they were alone.

"I thought you might try to come to my bed last night," she said in his ear.

His mouth went dry, but he made a small scoffing noise. "Both you and I know how unwise that would have been." He couldn't tell her just *how much* he'd wanted to.

"Hm, true. I half expected you to try anyway."

Was she laying down a challenge? "You do know what happens between a man and a woman when they are in bed together, don't you?" he murmured.

She gave a delicate, feminine laugh. "Yes, Your Grace. I know how babies are made. I assume, however, that you have vast experience and adequate knowledge on how to prevent that from happening."

“Sometimes it’s easy to get carried away. When men and women are involved in the act, making babies is often not foremost in their minds.” And it damn well wouldn’t be foremost in his mind if he were lying next to *her* in bed.

“What *is* foremost in their minds, then?” she challenged.

“Pleasure,” Theo said.

“Well, for the man, perhaps,” she said dismissively.

“Oh, no. Not just for the man. For the woman, too.”

“That’s not what I’ve heard.”

He chuckled low in his throat. “You’ve heard wrong.”

“Well...” She trailed off, and he wondered what pleasure she was imagining. But then she stiffened. “In any case, your attempts to come into my room would have been futile.” She made a mocking sound. “I would have, of course, forbidden your entry.” She looked into his eyes for a moment, and he could see the snap of challenge there, even in the dimness.

His heartbeat pounded against his chest, his breaths growing short as arousal coursed through him.

She dropped her gaze to his lips.

He shifted, pressing tighter against her, his body growing uncomfortably hard.

Her tongue darted out, making her lower lip glisten in clear invitation.

“Georgiana,” he whispered, moving closer, seeking out the warmth of her mouth. His lips lightly brushed against hers. “I need—”

Suddenly, the boat jolted to a stop, and they both jerked back. They blinked at each other, reality crashing back in.

Goddamn, he’d just come close to kissing her again.

The sound of roaring water rang in Theo’s ears as if they were mere inches from a massive waterfall. Taking a shaky breath, Theo turned his head to see the ceiling had stretched higher above them. They’d entered another cavern.

“Disembark here, if ye please,” their guide said as they sat up, taking in the new surroundings. This cavern felt smaller than the last, though it was hard to tell, given how the light of the candles barely lit the area around them. Their guide helped both of them out, then pulled the coffin boat up onto the silty bank. Theo held his candle out over the crystalline water and watched his reflection twisting among the dark, wavering shadows.

“If ye see the shades,” the guide warned, raising his voice above the sound of pounding water, “avert yer eyes, lest they decide to emerge from the water and fall upon us.”

Georgiana pressed closer to Theo as he stepped back from the water’s edge.

They followed the cave-dweller away from the boat. “That there’s Roger Rain’s House.” He gestured to their left, where a column of rain poured onto an outcropping of rocks below. It did indeed look like a contained rain shower, but the acoustics of the cavern magnified it to sound like a deluge. Circling around the spot of rain, the guide thrust his candle toward the yawning darkness of a descending passageway. “Follow me.”

Theo took Georgiana’s hand, and they followed him down a steady incline. The path flattened, and once again, water intersected their path. The other man turned to Georgiana. “Climb upon my back and I’ll help you across, milady.”

Georgiana glanced at Theo, and he squeezed her hand. “That won’t be necessary. Please hold my candle, sir.”

Nodding his assent, the guide took Theo’s candle, and he hooked his arm behind Georgiana’s knees and lifted her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and gazed up at him. Even in the dimness, he could see the warning in her eyes. “Don’t you dare drop me.”

Pulling her closer, he gave her a cocky grin. “Don’t you trust me?”

“Not at all.”

Theo laughed and held her tighter.

“Careful with yer footing, now,” the guide said. “The way is

smooth most times, but sometimes the current will carry in a rock for the sole purpose of tripping unsuspecting lovers.”

Georgiana huffed and murmured, “Oh, is that what we are now? Lovers?”

Theo sloshed through the water, the depth of which remained well below his boot tops. They stepped back up onto dry land, where he set Georgiana gently down but continued holding her hand and helping her over rough spots as the guide led them onward. Soon, they entered a tall cavern lit with a variety of lamps situated on outcroppings, some far overhead.

“This is the Chancel, and this is also where I’m to be leaving ye to fetch the others,” the man said. He gestured to a large, dry-looking blanket placed on a smooth area of the cavern’s floor, upon which had been laid an assortment of refreshments. “That there’s compliments of us and Lord Merrick. Enjoy.” With that, the man turned, quickly disappearing in the darkness the way they had come.

Theo and Georgiana looked at each other. She shrugged. “Looks like we’re going to be alone for a little while,” she said breezily. “*Whatever* will we do with the time?”

Chapter Sixteen

Georgiana had been taunting Theo, daring him to try to kiss her again. She'd *wanted* him to kiss her again. Despite knowing better than to play with fire, she couldn't seem to keep her hands off the man.

He hadn't taken her bait, though. Instead, he sat beside her on the blanket, keeping a more-than-respectable distance between them. He handed her a glass of wine before turning to gaze into the dark reaches of the cavern. They sat silently for a few minutes, the only sound the rushing water in the distance as they sipped their wine. Finally, he asked, "What do you think of this place?"

"It's dark. It's dirty. It's gloomy. It's eerie." She shrugged and took a sip of wine. "I believe I rather despise it."

"I find it interesting."

"*Why?*"

"Considering how it was created—what it took, over thousands and thousands of years, to create such a strange, wild place."

She glanced around at the outcroppings and slick walls. "I suppose you're right. I admit, it is extraordinary in that way. I wouldn't want to live here, though. Do you think those people back by the entrance reside there as a choice or by necessity?"

"Hard to tell." He leaned back on his elbows and stared at the cave ceiling high above, lit only intermittently by the scattered torches. "Sometimes," he said thoughtfully, "I wonder if the remaining tenants on my land have remained there by choice or necessity."

She grew still at the serious turn in the conversation. "Have you ever asked them?" she inquired softly.

"I doubt they'd give me an honest answer." He sighed. "You may find this surprising, but I'd like them to be there by choice. I'd like for them to have options but choose to remain because that land is what makes them happy. Does that make

sense?”

The previous duke was famous for not giving a fig about anyone beneath him in status—which included just about everyone in the world. Georgiana no longer could bring herself to believe that Theo was anything like his father.

“It does make sense,” she said. “And it is good to strive for your tenants’ happiness.”

He gave a bitter laugh. “I might strive for it, but it seems impossible. I feel the land is tainted, somehow. That it is as far from being a happy place as a nightmare might be. Sometimes I believe it has been cursed.”

“That can’t be true. I’m sure you have experienced at least some happiness at Clairwood Park.”

“Yes,” he admitted after a moment. “When Sebastian and I were very young and our mother was still alive.”

Georgiana didn’t remember the duchess well. She recalled seeing her at church sometimes, and occasionally from a distance at various community events. She was rarely mentioned anymore, her reputation—whatever it might have been—buried deeply under her husband’s far more colorful and scandalous one. “What was your mother like?” Georgiana asked.

“She was...” Theo looked away. “She was a kind, generous soul. She was happy, once. When I was very young, she had many friends who used to come to visit us, but year after year the number of her friends dwindled—I was always sure, and still am, that that was because of my father’s antics. She tried to be kind to the tenants, but at one point, my father forbade her from speaking to them. I think he was irrationally jealous of anyone and everyone with whom she shared her gentle spirit. She always wore a brave face and held her head high. She pretended he wasn’t a horrible excuse for a husband, that she didn’t care at all about all the terrible things he did. But she did care. Deeply.”

That description reminded Georgiana of Theo, with his nonchalant air and dismissive attitude hiding a caring soul

beneath. She wondered if he had made the connection between his own behavior and his mother's.

“She tried to counter him,” Theo continued. “She used her pin money to give the servants Christmas bonuses, and she sent baskets to the tenants every season. But”—he shrugged—“he prevented her from doing as much as she wanted. She tried to teach Sebastian and me how to be stewards of our lands and good, fair employers to the people who resided there. We were boys, though, and for the most part we ignored those lessons.”

“Oh, I don't know about that,” Georgiana murmured, thinking of his kindness toward the servant yesterday.

“Well, Sebastian certainly took the opposite route.” He took a long swallow of wine.

“When did she die?” Georgiana asked.

“When I was fifteen.” He was quiet for a moment. “I was away. As usual.”

Was that guilt she detected in his voice?

“For all I know,” Theo continued bitterly, “my father killed her. And I wasn't there to stop it.”

His hand clenched into a fist over the blanket, and the full force of Theo's antipathy toward his father suddenly struck her. He despised the man. The constant comparisons between him and the previous duke must be torture for him. She vowed then and there that she would never make that mistake in the future.

“Do you really believe that?” Georgiana asked.

He turned to her, and she realized that she'd moved closer to him, so close that she could feel the warmth emanating off his body in this frigid place. “I don't know. All I know is that I was gone. I refused to come home, even when she wrote and asked me to.” He lowered his head, his shoulders sagging. “I might have been able to prevent her death, and so many other things, if I was there.”

She frowned. “What other things?”

He pressed his lips together and looked away. “The disrepair of the house. The fallow lands. The decimation of the livestock. The unhappiness of the tenants. If I had been present, I might have been able to control some of the damage.”

“You were just a boy,” she said.

“*Sebastian* was just a boy,” he corrected. “He was only ten years old when our mother died, and he lived there for the remainder of his youth. My father didn’t send him to school as he had me. He said he wanted to ‘keep his spare close,’ but the truth was that he didn’t want to spend a farthing more than necessary on my brother. As much as he spent excessively on his own entertainments, he was miserly when it came to others.”

Georgiana winced. “That must have been difficult for your brother.”

“It was terrible for him.” Theo’s expression darkened. “And I am to blame.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t fight for him. I escaped from Clairwood Park, but I didn’t help my brother escape. I should have done something, but I was selfish, and by the time I stopped being so self-absorbed, it was too late.”

“I knew Lord Sebastian a little. More than I knew you,” Georgiana said. “While you were gone at school throughout my childhood, he was in residence at Clairwood. My father never willingly allowed either Lizzie or me into his vicinity, of course, but we were neighbors, so we did encounter one another once in a while. If it makes you feel any better, he was always very polite to us. Far more polite than the duke ever was. But then—I remember he moved to London when I was fifteen or sixteen. Perhaps that was when he started...um...” She searched for a word that wouldn’t be too harsh. “...declining.”

Theo nodded. “He was seventeen when he moved permanently to London. I had my own lodgings in town by

then, but I heard of his exploits.”

She looked at his guilt-ravaged face and reached up to gently touch his cheek. “There’s no reason to punish yourself over what’s past. It’s the present—and future—that count. It sounds to me like you’re doing your best to mend the damage your father has done.”

“It feels impossible sometimes. The damage he wrought runs in the very veins of Clairwood Park.”

“It might take time. But I trust you will succeed.”

He turned his face so her finger was on his lips and kissed gently. Then, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. “Georgiana, I—”

She couldn’t stop herself. She moved her hand around his neck, drew him closer, and pressed her lips to his.

This time, she was even bolder. She explored his warm, soft lips with her own. She peppered kisses across his cheek and along his jawline. Soon, she was lost in the feel of him against her. He tightened his arms and then, kissing her deeply, ran his hand sensuously over her hip and waist, his fingers teasing over her bottom.

She followed his lead, moving her hand down his back. Her fingers had just reached the top curve of his taut buttocks and she was glorying in his potent masculinity when—

“And here we are, yer lordship and ladyship,” a raspy voice announced. Georgiana and Theo jerked apart, and Georgiana’s hands went to her hair, which she was sure was so askew it looked as if she’d been tumbled in a haystack. Fortunately, everyone knew they’d just been literally lying on a bed of hay in the coffin boat, and hopefully no one would give it a second thought.

The guide was stepping into the cavern, holding his candle. Lord and Lady Merrick entered just behind them, their shadowy faces grinning with delight.

...

The day had started off perfectly. The cave was not only a wonder, but exploring it with Georgiana, their conversation and their kisses, had turned the experience into one of the best days of Theo's life. When the entire group had arrived at the Chancel and they were all seated around the blanket laughing and talking, the ropemakers' children had begun to sing in the "orchestral gallery" high above them, their clear, innocent voices ringing through the cavern in a way that made the company gasp with delight. The acoustics of the place were such that it felt like they were surrounded by song, as if the music caressed their entire bodies. Theo had never heard anything like it.

Afterward, they'd gone a little deeper into the cave, down into the dark depths of the "Devil's Cellar" before retracing their steps and taking the coffin boat in the same pairs they'd come down in to the entrance. Georgiana and Theo had been talking easily, delighting in all they'd seen, and they had arrived back in the Bell House, it seemed, in mere seconds.

The day would have been completely delightful if not for the picnic that came afterward. After they emerged from the cave, blinking at the bright, warm day aboveground, they rode up to the castle ruins, where a picnic blanket was laid in the shadow of the keep, the only building of the castle complex that remained intact. Merrick told them that the castle had been built for a son of the Conqueror six hundred years ago, but the last time it was used was in Queen Elizabeth's reign, when the keep had been used as a prison.

The place had felt pleasant enough until Merrick had begun describing the types of torture that were used on the prisoners who'd been kept there. Theo lost his appetite somewhere between the "shin crusher" and the "iron maiden." Then, he'd glanced away for just a second only to turn around to see goddamn Hawkins sitting beside Georgiana on the blanket.

He'd gone over to them and, scowling down at the viscount, said, "Hawkins, I believe you're in my spot."

Hawkins looked up at him. "I don't think so, Desborough." He looked around himself. "I don't see any proof of your ownership of this location."

Theo wanted to push the man away, but that was ridiculous. Despite the kisses he and Georgiana had shared in the library and then in the cave, he had no claim over her.

Though he wished he did.

Grinding his teeth, Theo had taken the spot next to Trevelyan and had stewed for the next hour as everyone else, including Georgiana, seemed to have a wonderful time.

They'd arrived back at Elder Abbey at dusk and had dined late. Now, everyone had gathered in the drawing room for a dramatic reading of *She Stoops to Conquer*. The ladies chose Georgiana to play the heroine, Kate, and Hawkins put himself forward as Marlow—the man Kate lures into her heart by pretending to be a barmaid.

Theo was, annoyingly, given the role of Kate's father.

So he was already supremely irritated when Hawkins took the seat next to where Georgiana sat on the sofa. When he'd raised Georgiana's hand and pressed his lips to the back of it for what felt like the dozenth time, Theo had had enough.

He stalked over to Hawkins. "Move."

Still holding Georgiana's gloved hand in his own, Hawkins blinked at him. "I think not."

"I will be sitting beside Miss Milford tonight."

Hawkins gave him a look that suggested he was being ridiculous. "I don't think so."

"Hawkins—" he growled.

"It is appropriate for the hero of the play to be seated beside the heroine," Hawkins said priggishly.

"I don't care what's appropriate. That seat is mine."

Hawkins tilted his head. "And why would I give it to you?"

Georgiana yanked her hand from Hawkins's. "This is absurd. I will not tolerate this childish bickering." She turned to Lady Merrick. "Forgive me, but it was a long day, and I am exhausted. Good night."

With that, she strode out of the drawing room, leaving Theo and Hawkins staring after her, jaws dropped.

In an attempt to not appear like some lovestruck Romeo, Theo stayed for the reading of the play, and when Hawkins retired after act two, he still remained, though every page of the damn thing felt like it droned on for hours.

Finally, it was over. While everyone else seemed in the mood to continue to laugh and chat, Theo was not. He excused himself, taking what felt like the first deep breath he'd taken all day as soon as he closed the door on the revelry. He went straight upstairs to his room, removed his shoes, cravat, tailcoat, and waistcoat, and sat at the dressing table, head in hands. He'd been an ass tonight. All he'd wanted was to be next to Georgiana, but goddamn Hawkins kept inserting himself. A man could only expect to endure so much of that nonsense, right?

Still, he couldn't fault Georgiana for her reaction. Her reaction was—

Just a moment...

He raised his head, straining to hear. Quiet voices were coming from next door. A low feminine voice, an extended moment of silence, and then—

Was that a *moan*?

What. The. Hell?

He stood, the chair scraping against the floor as it was pushed back. He strode to his door, yanked it open, then stalked to Georgiana's door. He pressed his ear against it.

Another low moan.

Had Hawkins gone into her room? Was that bastard accosting her?

Half expecting the door to be locked, he turned the door handle. It opened easily.

He lunged inside, focus homing in on the bed.

Chapter Seventeen

No one was on the bed. Instead, a yelp came from the direction of the hearth. And a splashing noise.

Splashing?

He yanked his head around to see Georgiana in a brass bathtub, her milky white shoulders shining with dampness, her hair loose and wet and cascading down her back.

Her arms were crossed at her breasts—her bare, pale, gleaming breasts—and she was glowering at him. His mouth went dry.

“How *dare* you!” she screeched.

He glanced back at the door and closed it quickly, to shield her—and him—from anyone’s curious gaze. He locked it for good measure.

“What are you doing?”

He turned back to her. Her face was a beautiful play of rage. “I heard a noise.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What noise?”

He straightened his shoulders. “It sounded like someone was in here. Like you were...”

She cocked a brow. “Like I was...?”

He ground his teeth. “Making love.”

She choked. He couldn’t discern whether it was a choke of anger or of mirth. She tightened her arms around herself, pushing the pale globes of her breasts up even higher. “To whom, I wonder,” she snapped.

He looked away. She knew what he’d thought. He damn well wasn’t going to voice it. He refused to utter goddamn Hawkins’s name.

“Sorry to disappoint. There is no viscount here for you to maul. However...” She straightened in the tub, the water

sloshing slightly at the sides. “Even if there was, I have the right to make love to whomever I choose.”

His lips parted on a hiss of breath through his teeth.

“I also have the right to sit beside whomever I choose. You don’t own me, *Your Grace*.”

He wanted to own her, though. He wanted to own her body, her heart, her soul...

This was absolutely not the moment to share that with her. He pressed his lips together.

In any case, as much as he hated to admit it, he was the one who’d been wrong. Even if goddamn Hawkins had been in here, unless he’d been assaulting Georgiana, Theo had no right to get involved.

“I apologize,” he said through gritted teeth.

“For what? For pouting like a child among our friends earlier? For interrupting my solitude? For behaving like a boor?”

“Yes,” he pushed out. “Yes. To all that.”

She glared at him. He stepped forward. “Did you want him here?”

“Who?” she demanded.

“You know who.”

She stared at him mulishly. He took another step forward.

“Did you want him sitting beside you at the picnic?” Because, goddamn it, it had looked like she was having a wonderful time.

She sat rigidly in the tub, unmoving, her scowl unwavering.

“Georgiana. Tell me the truth.”

Her jaw worked. Then, she bit out, “Of course I didn’t. You’re behaving just as absurdly as he is. Neither of you can see how much I loathe him.”

He had seen her dislike of Hawkins. Something had happened today, though, that had caused all of Theo’s reason

to flee. When he'd seen her directing that pretty smile at goddamn Hawkins once during the picnic, all his common sense had vanished, and cold, competitive jealousy had clouded the obvious.

He was a fool.

"You know what he wants from you," he gritted out.

She looked back up at him, moss-green eyes snapping with challenge. "*Of course* I do. What every man wants."

Not me, he wanted to say. Instead, he told her what goddamn Hawkins was. "He is a fortune hunter. It makes..." He clenched his hands into fists at his sides. "It makes me sick to see him fawning over you. His false devotion. His behavior reminds me of the walls of the Devil's Arse. Slimy."

A smile wavered at the edges of her lips but didn't appear. "I know," she said. "Me too."

He was a step away from the tub now, but he stared at her face, refusing to allow his gaze to stray lower. If he allowed it, he would be lost.

"Then why are you so angry with me for feeling that way?" he asked her, even as a part of him knew.

"I am not angry with your feeling. I am angry at your overbearing behavior and your apparent assumption that I am an innocent who will be taken in by his act. I am not gullible, Theo. I have been managing men like him since my debut season."

Theo's lips parted in surprise.

She continued. "I know exactly how to handle men like that. You are doing nothing but making it worse, making him feel as if he has a chance."

"But he doesn't."

"Of course he doesn't!"

He knelt down beside the tub and looked into her eyes. "I hate his impudence."

"I hate *your* impudence."

His lips tilted upward. “Yet...a part of you likes it.”

“No.”

“Yes. A part of you does.” He leaned closer. “Admit it.”

She caught her breath, and he watched a faint blush spread over her cheeks. He took that moment to, very deliberately, move his eyes downward. Her breasts rose above her clasped forearms, rising and falling with each intake of her breath, glistening with dampness. He trailed his gaze lower, where the faint shadow of darkness protecting her sex wavered under the water.

He dragged his eyes back up, heat prickling his skin. Hell, it felt like the temperature in the room had increased tenfold.

“You don’t want him,” he rasped out.

“No,” she admitted quietly. “Not him.”

He locked eyes with her. Every instinct was telling him to drag her out of the water and carry her to the bed. To sample every bit of her delectable body.

“Never him,” she whispered.

He licked his lips. Slowly. Deliberately.

“Who do you want, then?” he managed.

She was quiet. For a long moment, the silence felt as heavy as mist. Finally, she whispered, “You.”

He blinked slowly. He hadn’t really believed she’d admit to that. The word reverberated straight down his spine. Directly to his cock.

“You heard me moan earlier, didn’t you?” she asked quietly.

He managed a nod.

“Because I was thinking of you. Imagining you...”

He closed his eyes. He couldn’t look at her for a second longer without dragging her into his arms. He clenched his fists at his sides.

“Imagining me...what?”

“On top of me. Touching me...everywhere,” she whispered, the water sloshing softly as she leaned closer to him. Then, her finger traced over his lips.

His eyes flew open. She was reaching for him, her breasts exposed now, her nipples skimming the surface of the water. He took her face in his hands and kissed her, pouring all his longing into it. He wanted her. More intensely, more violently, than he'd ever wanted anything in his life.

Keeping her face at just the right angle to deepen the kiss, he trailed his other hand down, over her jaw, over her wet shoulder, feeling a strand of hair at his fingertips, down the front of her body until he brushed the backs of his knuckles over the bare tip of her breast, sending a shudder through her that passed through him as well.

He cupped her breast in his palm. Traced over it with the pad of his thumb, then repeated his exploration on the other side, his hand dipping in and out of the warm water. Her fingers entwined in his hair, tugging at the strands, as she gasped and wriggled under his touch. He laughed softly, his lips moving over the soft skin of her cheek. “You like that, do you?”

“Ohhh,” she purred against his mouth. “Yes.”

“Do you know what I want?”

“What?”

“To pull you out of here and make love to you while you're wet and slippery beneath me. Kiss you all over while you're begging me for more.”

“Mmm,” she said as he kissed the corner of her mouth. “*More.*”

He pinched her breast, and she spasmed, sending wavelets splashing against the edge of the tub. She was so responsive. He groaned and moved his hand lower, over the soft curve of her stomach to the crease of her thigh, and then to her center. His fingertips had just touched the soft hairs that coiled there when the doorknob rattled and a voice sounded outside. “Miss?”

Georgiana jerked, but Theo stilled at the sound of her maid's

voice. This time, he didn't pull back. Instead, his palm settled over her mound.

"Tell her to go away," he whispered, eyes locked with hers.

She stared into his eyes for a moment, as if searching deep into his soul. Then she gave a slight nod. "I don't need anything else this evening, Anne. Go to bed. You may have the bathtub removed in the morning."

Her voice sounded clear, confident, and unwavering.

"Are you sure, miss?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Good night."

"Good night, miss."

They both listened as the sound of the maid's footsteps receded down the corridor. He slid his fingers back up Georgiana's body, between her breasts and farther until they closed lightly around the column of her neck.

He was nearly delirious for her. But she wasn't ready for what he wanted to do to her. How he wanted to ravish her, possess every inch of her...

She wasn't ready. And probably never would be.

You don't own me.

He had to respect that.

"I need to go," he whispered. "Before..."

"Before we get 'carried away'?"

"Yes. Exactly."

She sighed. "I think I understand why you call it 'carried away.' There was an instant, a few moments ago, when I wanted—" She broke off.

"What did you want?"

She met his eyes with her own. "Everything."

"God knows I want to give you everything, Georgiana. But I also..."

She tilted her head. "What?"

Releasing her neck, he touched her cheek, very gently. “I don’t want to hurt you. I’m trying to be a gentleman.”

She laughed. “You mean you don’t wish to compromise me? I fear you already have, sir.”

With that, she did something that surprised him completely. She stood, water cascading off her perfect form. Looking up, he saw flashes of pale skin, a curved buttocks, a bounce of a breast, a gleaming nipple, a flare of hips, the triangle of hair above a slender thigh... Oh God.

She gracefully stepped out of the tub and walked to a stack of towels that had been placed on a nearby table. After shaking one of them out, she turned to him, giving him one more glimpse of perfection before she wrapped the towel around that flawless form.

Good God. Jesus. He’d never seen anything more erotic in his life.

It occurred to him that she—the innocent, inexperienced one—was schooling him, the jaded rake, on seduction.

He groaned, and her lips tipped in the faintest semblance of a smile. “Well?”

“You’re killing me,” he rasped out. “Is that your intention?”

“Perhaps.” She feigned a pout. “But alas. You don’t wish to ‘compromise’ me.”

“Any further than I already have.”

She leaned back against the table, analyzing him where he still knelt beside the tub. He rose on creaking knees so they faced each other, the tub between them.

“If anyone found us together right now, they’d expect us to marry,” she said. “Even though we’re ten feet apart.”

Their physical separation hardly mattered in society’s eyes. They were in her bedroom, alone, and she wore only a towel. If they were discovered, they would be forced to wed.

“Except my father,” she said. “He’d rather die than allow me to marry the Duke of Despots.”

That made Theo look away.

“So I’d say we’re safe.” Her eyes met his again, steady and sure. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Safe from marriage, yes. I suppose. Thanks to your father’s hatred of me.”

“Isn’t that to your benefit, in this case?”

He shrugged lightly. “Perhaps. Is it to yours?”

She mirrored his shrug. “Perhaps.”

“So you wouldn’t want to marry me,” he said. “Theoretically. If we were caught.”

She hesitated. Then said, “Men only ever want one thing from me.”

“I don’t want your fortune.” He’d never thought of her money. He’d only thought of her.

“Is that true?” She sounded truly curious. “By all accounts, your father squandered his own fortune, leaving only a crumbling estate on the verge of ruin in the country and a sprawling old town house in London.”

“My father might have thrown away endless amounts on whores, drink, and gambling, but those funds came from a near bottomless well, and he was miserly in every other aspect, including the maintenance of his estates and the people who depended on him. However, I have made my own way. I have no need of that tainted fortune I inherited. Or yours, for that matter.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You’ve made your own way? How?”

“I am involved in various interests with various partners. Mostly in trade and business schemes with Trevelyan.”

“How do I not know this?” she asked.

“Why would I make my financial pursuits public? They are nobody’s business but my own. I prefer to invest discreetly, though if one were to look, the information on all my ventures could be easily obtained. There is nothing subversive or

secretive about them.” He stepped around the tub toward her. “Did you really believe my interest in you was financially driven?”

“No,” she said thoughtfully. “I never did. Which is singular in my interactions with unmarried men. You are the only one who’s never looked at me as if I have giant pound signs tattooed all over my body.”

That image arrested him for a moment, but then he shook it off. “I have never thought of your fortune, Georgiana. Not once,” he said. “Until you forced me to just now.”

She studied him, head tilted to the side. “Are you sure? You could merely be a good actor. Maybe you’re in dire financial straits and I am your only path to salvation. I wouldn’t know.”

He shook his head. “But you do know. Because I’ve told you the truth.” She was silent, and after a moment, he added, “And you know I have.”

“I suppose so.”

“So you are safe, then. Rest assured, I would never pursue you for your fortune.”

“And we can be together without any concern over being compelled to marry. Therefore, you do not need to fear compromising me.”

He shook his head. That wasn’t why he’d been afraid to compromise her. Unlike some bucks of the ton, he didn’t find the idea of marriage repulsive, and the thought of spending his life with this woman... Well, that wasn’t repulsive at all. “That’s not my conc—”

But the words died in his throat as she did something that shocked him to silence.

With a flick of her wrist, she dropped her towel.

Chapter Eighteen

Georgiana's heart was going to beat right out of her chest. She stood before the Duke of Desborough completely naked, rivulets of cooling bathwater running down her back from her wet hair.

She straightened her spine, even as something told her to run away and hide, or at least pick up the dratted towel and cover herself again.

Instead, she took a bold step toward him.

"I know two things," she said, rather impressed by how clear and strong her voice emerged. "I know that your honor will never allow you to use this against me. And I know I want you."

She saw his throat move as he swallowed. Hard. He stood stock still a few feet away from her, his gaze skimming over her naked flesh from top to bottom.

"Are you going to make me stand here?" she asked after an extended moment of silence. "I'm growing cold."

That did it. Stepping forward, he scooped her into his arms just as he had in the cave—this time somewhat more urgently. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he stalked toward the bed. He laid her on it in a strange moment of gentleness, as if she were something delicate, before grabbing the back of his shirt and tearing it over his head.

"Ooh," she said out loud. She couldn't help it. His was the first real naked male torso she'd ever seen, and it was more appealing than she'd imagined. She reached up and out to him. "Come here," she commanded.

Dressed only in his trousers, which showed the outline of his manhood in a way that made her heart pound even harder, he obeyed, crawling up onto the bed and then over her, radiating energy like some hungry predator.

He straddled her, a knee on each side of her body, then gazed down at her. "Is this what you want?"

“Yes,” she admitted. “Exactly this.”

He laughed. The husky sound was at the same time ominous and seductive, and it sent a frisson of lust through her.

“I want you...in every way,” she told him, staring up into those intense blue eyes. Despite her desire, however, she was still somewhat sensible. There were things they needed to discuss first. “You must not get me with child, Theo.”

His jaw worked, but he nodded, not breaking eye contact.

“I want to feel you...everywhere. But there are some risks I cannot take.”

“I understand,” he said.

She arched her back slightly, raising her breasts toward him. He had touched her there earlier, and—Lord, while she’d enjoyed touching her own breasts now and then, including during the seconds before he’d stormed into her room—*his* touch sent fireworks of desire through her.

He bent down and, very gently, kissed one nipple. She hissed out a breath.

“You won’t regret this, Georgiana,” he murmured. “I’m going to make you feel so good.”

Of that, she had no doubt. Already, the waves of sensation barreled through her so strongly, it felt like she was drowning in them.

He kissed the tip of her breast again, and she shuddered.

“So good,” he repeated. He cupped her in his hands, kneading as he licked and kissed one of her nipples while brushing his thumb roughly over the nipple on the other side. She moaned, arching into his hands, into his lips.

He kissed her there until she was panting, wriggling with desire, realizing dimly that she’d tangled her fingers in his silky black hair. One of his hands moved down until he firmly cupped her hip, pinning it to the bed.

His fingers slipped over her thigh and down between her legs, and despite herself, she stiffened. She wanted this, but

the reality of his hands on her was already almost more sensation than she could bear.

“Open for me,” he murmured.

He pushed on her stiff thigh, and with effort, she relaxed it so he could spread her legs wider apart. Keeping his hand at the top of her thigh, he moved back up, and when he reached her lips again, he kissed her as his fingertips stroked her center ever so lightly.

“Just *feel*,” he murmured. “Feel how I touch you.”

She shuddered.

“Mmm,” he said. “You’re so wet for me.” His fingers moved over her, sliding up and down and then gently pinching a spot that made her cry out. He swallowed her cry with his kiss. “Do you like that?”

She couldn’t lie to him. That pinch had sent a deep throb straight through her center. “Yesss,” she hissed. She canted her hips toward him, urging him to do it again. He did. And then he focused on that very spot. Circling it, pinching it, stroking over it until her low moans came constant and unchecked. Her eyes closed of their own accord, and she sank into it, the two points of focus wherever his lips and fingers stroked over her. His lips moved downward again, and when they caught her nipple between them, she let out a loud gasp.

Oh, Lord. She was... “I—I’m...”

His fingers pressed harder, squeezed tighter. She thrashed beneath him, and then stilled all of a sudden, her body strung as tight as a violin string. And then she unraveled as release came in sharp spasms so strong she thought they might tear her apart in the very best way.

It went on and on. When he lifted his head, his palm went flat over her center, and as the final aftershocks still sparked through her, she dragged her eyes open. He was staring at her, his grin cocky.

“Satisfied with yourself, are you?” she murmured.

“Your satisfaction is my satisfaction,” he said. Rolling beside

her, he tucked her against his body until she was pressed against his torso.

“You’re so warm,” she observed.

“Burning,” he said quietly. “For you.” He nudged closer to her, and even through his trousers, she could feel the steely length of his erection.

“That doesn’t hurt?” she asked.

“‘Hurt’ is one word for it,” he said into her damp hair.

“Is there something that can be done about it?” she said. “I mean...without—”

“Yes.”

She pulled back slightly, looking up at him. “What is it?”

He stared at her, then slowly shook his head. “No. I don’t think you’re quite ready for that.”

That was a challenge if she’d ever heard one. The muscles throughout her body that had been so limp a moment ago began to tense again. “Of course I am,” she said.

“I don’t think so.”

She huffed. “So you’d rather remain in pain for...” She frowned. “For how long does it last?”

“Several hours, at least. Unless...”

“Unless what?”

He laughed softly, his body shaking against hers. “Unless I take care of it myself.”

“Perhaps you should do that, then.”

“Right now?”

“Yes,” she said primly. “Since I am apparently too innocent, you may teach me what to do, so the next time—”

“There’s to be a next time?” he interrupted.

“Of course.” Then, she hesitated, looking up at him. “Unless...you don’t—”

“Oh, I do.” His arms tightened around her. “If it were up to me, there would be a next time every day. Some days, two or three next times.”

“Well, then. If there’s going to be so many next times”—she wouldn’t think about their limited time together right now... she was due to leave Elder Abbey in less than a week—“then I ought to learn how to please you.” She clasped her lower lip between her teeth, then pulled it free as she looked at him from under her lashes. “Like you just pleased me.”

He gazed at her with hooded eyes but didn’t move.

She tugged his arm from its position locked around her and pressed his palm between their bodies over the fabric of his trousers. “*Show me.*”

He wrapped his fingers around his length and squeezed, her palm over the back of his hand.

She hummed. “What do you call it?”

“Call what?” His voice sounded a little clogged.

“Your...” She pushed on his hand a little, and he tilted his hips as if to welcome her touch. “*That.* I fear I have never heard it mentioned in polite society, though I have read about it in various texts on human physiology. Do you say *penis* when you refer to it?”

He laughed gruffly. “No.”

“What, then?”

“Oh, it goes by many names, ranging from clinical to vulgar.”

“Ooh, tell me the vulgar ones.”

“Hm... ‘tickle-tail’ is one I’ve heard.”

She rather thought that the hardness between his legs was capable of far more than tickling her. “Hm. I do not like that one. What else?”

“‘Dirk.’”

She arched a brow. “Surely it is not as sharp as a dirk.”

“Then I suppose you wouldn’t like ‘Adam’s dagger’ or ‘nature’s scythe,’ either.”

“Not at all.”

“‘Prick’ might sound a bit less painful.”

“People say ‘prick’? Meaning, it gives you a little prick, like a needle?” she asked, looking down at their hands covering something that appeared far, far larger than a needle.

He frowned, clearly not liking her analogy at all. “Forget that one. How about ‘shaft of delight’?” He squeezed himself again, and she curved her fingers over the back of his hand. He groaned softly. “Or perhaps ‘the pleasure-pivot’?”

She rolled her eyes. “I suppose *you’d* say those are accurate names for it.”

“Very accurate,” he murmured, his lids sinking shut at whatever sensation he was experiencing. “But you seem...” She pressed her hand harder over his, and he let out a sharp breath. “...unconvinced.”

“Not necessarily. It’s just that I cannot imagine asking you if I might touch your ‘shaft of delight’ without laughing at the absurdity.”

He seemed to stop breathing as he opened his eyes and asked in a tight voice, “Do you want to touch it?”

“Once I find an acceptable name for it. What do *you* call it?”

He tilted his hips up again, pressing into their hands. “Generally, I just call it my cock.”

She was confused. “You’ve named your sexual organ after a rooster?”

He made a strangled approximation of a laugh. “It’s a common word for it, you sheltered little minx.”

“Well,” she conceded. “I suppose it’s better than penis.” She smiled wickedly. “Can I touch your cock, Theo?”

He gazed at her for a moment, then rolled onto his back beside her. “Climb over me, Georgiana. Unbutton my falls.”

She sat up and straddled his legs, her hair sending a small rivulet of water down her back. He stroked his hands down her sides as she leaned over and undid the buttons of his falls. She pulled his trousers open and stared at what lay below.

His cock was far larger than the ones she'd seen on Greek statues and classical paintings.

She probably stared a moment too long before he murmured, "I'll take them off."

She blinked up at him, and it took a moment for her to register that he intended to remove his trousers completely. Before she could move, he was lifting her off of him and then kicking the garment away. Then, he lay back down, watching her carefully.

"Do you still want to touch my cock?" he asked huskily. "Or have you changed your mind?"

"I still want to," she said confidently, though it felt like a thousand butterflies were taking flight inside her.

He took her hand and pressed it over his length. Automatically, her fingers curled around it, and she squeezed cautiously before releasing him and touching her fingertips to it, running them up and down. She circled her thumb and forefinger around it—her fingertips didn't touch—and ran the circle of her fingertips over him, watching his soft skin move as she stroked him before moving to the tip.

She lost track of time as she explored him, tracing every bit of skin and vein and running her fingers over the taut ballocks beneath.

"Enough, you tease," he finally muttered above her. "You're going to kill me." It sounded like he was speaking through his teeth.

"Am I?" she asked. "I don't mean to hurt—"

"No, it's not that. It's *too* light. Too damned gentle." He curved his entire hand around himself and gave a hard tug. "Like this," he growled. He put her palm back over him, then covered her hand with his own and guided her in hard jerks up and down the length of him, sliding his fingers over the tip

with every tug.

She watched in fascination as they worked. It didn't take long before he was grunting with every tug, and his cock grew even larger in their joined grasp.

It was magnificent to watch him. Moment by moment, he gave up more shreds of his control until his jaw locked and his stomach clenched so hard, she could see the ridges of muscle beneath his skin. He moved their hands faster, and faster yet, until he was moving erratically, his hips flexing.

And then, he groaned, long and low, and arched up, and under her palm, his cock contracted. He half sat up, at the same time pulling her to him with his free hand. She felt the release rushing through him, and as he held her close, dampness spread across her stomach. He gasped against her neck.

“Georgiana. Oh God, Georgiana.”

Chapter Nineteen

Theo might have fallen asleep. The experience of Georgiana Milford's questing hand on his cock... Hell, he'd come so hard he'd thought it would never stop. Then, his strength drained completely out of him. He'd wrapped Georgiana's naked body in his arms, pulled her down on top of him, and closed his eyes.

The last thing he remembered was her commenting softly, "We fit together."

They did. The way their bodies were locked physically was a perfect fit. But there was more to it than that. Her words held wonder—the same wonder he was feeling. It was deeper than just a physical fit. Far deeper.

"We do," he'd murmured back to her. "We fit perfectly."

Now, she was shifting over him, and he opened his eyes to find her on her side, leaning on her forearm and gazing at him, a small smile on her face.

"Are you all right?"

"I...*no*," he whispered. "I'm..." He couldn't finish the sentence. He didn't even know *how* he would finish it if he could. Georgiana Milford was like no one he'd ever met, and every part of her, every facet, every face, drew him tighter into her snare. And he didn't want to be anywhere else.

Her expression faltered. "You seemed...quite satisfied." She shifted, and he closed his eyes, savoring the feel of her against him. "All those hard muscles are soft and pliable under me."

"I *am* satisfied," he mumbled. That wasn't to say he wouldn't gladly do it all over again. He had so many ideas of things to do to her, things he could teach her to do to him. Even if they could never engage in the ultimate act.

God, he wanted that, too. There would be nothing better than being locked inside Georgiana's hot, tight body.

His cock was beginning to rise again. But, no. She might be

eager and willing—and thinking that made him even harder—but she was new to this. He wanted to take it slow with her. Explore her, enjoy every moment, every new discovery.

She kissed his jaw. “I love you being in my bed. I loved... everything we did together.”

“So did I,” he said honestly.

“But you should probably go soon. Anne’s likely to knock any moment.”

He blinked in surprise and looked around. Was that daylight creeping in through the edges of the curtains?

“Is it *morning*?” he asked.

“Yes. It’s early yet. But...”

He tried to shake off the stupor of being completely owned by this woman. “We *slept*?”

“Evidently,” she said.

Good God.

“You seem shocked,” she said.

“I am. I haven’t slept that well in years.” And he’d never slept until dawn with a woman before.

“Neither have I.”

Was that a hint of shyness in her expression? After all that seductive boldness of last night? She was a mass of lovely contradictions, his Georgiana.

His Georgiana.

He pushed his hand into her tangled curls, which held only a hint of dampness now, and pulled her head toward his. He kissed her.

Damn. He probably shouldn’t have done that. The moment her lips touched his, his cock went fully, painfully erect. He guided her onto her back and moved over her, kissing deeply, loving the feel of her naked body under his. The smooth, soft skin, the gentle curve of her hipbone, the brush of the hair between her legs, the taut peaks of her nipples...

Just one taste...then he'd go. He couldn't help it—he rocked against her body, his cock glorying in the friction.

Just then the doorknob rattled, and then there was a knock. “Miss?”

They groaned into each other's mouths. “It's Anne,” she whispered. Then, louder. “I'm exhausted, Anne. Give me another half hour, will you?”

“Aye, miss. But isn't the party heading out for another shoot? You said you intended to join.”

Theo pulled himself off her, his eyes locked with hers.

Georgiana groaned. “All right. Come back in ten minutes.”

Theo frowned at her.

“You told them you were going, too, didn't you?” she whispered. “I think people would become suspicious if neither of us went.”

He sighed. She was right. And despite everyone's vow not to spread rumors about what happened at the house party, news of him and Georgiana having a torrid affair in the midst of it would surely be too sensational for someone *not* to share.

He didn't want any harm coming to Georgiana because of him.

He slipped off the bed and began to search for his clothes as Georgiana pulled a nightgown over her head. His shirt was easy to find—it was on the floor by the bathtub. He finally found his trousers lodged at the bottom edge of the bed, tangled in the bedcovers.

Georgiana's eyes had trailed his every movement, and as he buttoned his falls, he stilled, her hot gaze blazing over his skin.

“What is it?” he asked her.

She crossed her arms over her chest, humming in satisfaction as her gaze raked over his body. “I like watching you. I like...” She hesitated, then added in a quiet voice, “You.”

He strode to her and kissed her deeply before murmuring against her lips, “I like you, too.”

She wrapped her arms around him and looked up into his face, smiling. "I'll see you downstairs?"

He nodded.

"Good. This time, I'll be sure to bag more birds than you do." She gave him a cocky grin.

He laughed. "Between the two of us, if we bag one, it will be a miracle."

...

Theo didn't go on the shoot, after all. As they were preparing to leave, Lord Trevelyan entered the breakfast room and gave Georgiana the message that the duke wouldn't be able to join. Georgiana frowned. "Why not?"

"He received some news from home and needs the day to address the issue."

When she asked about "the issue," Lord Trevelyan wouldn't tell her, which wasn't a surprise. The earl wasn't a man to share others' secrets.

Georgiana desperately wanted to stay at Elder Abbey with Theo, but instead she went along with the men on the shoot, spurred by the concern that people would start to question her and Theo's relationship if she spent the day with him.

It turned out, they already had. As they were heading to the moor, Lord Hawkins sidled his horse next to hers.

"So," he said without preamble. "You've been spending time with Desborough."

"We are friends."

He looked smug. "Oh? I thought your families were enemies."

"Whatever gave you that impression?" she asked.

"Perhaps Mr. Milford's palpable dislike of everything associated with the St. Clairs," he said.

Georgiana sighed. She'd forgotten that her father and Hawkins were acquaintances.

“The St. Clairs are our neighbors, and of course there are disagreements between neighbors from time to time.” Lord Hawkins’s skeptical look told her in no uncertain terms that he knew it was more than that. “But we are not enemies,” she said, then added, “not in the least.”

“I see.”

They rode along in silence for a while. Georgiana kept her back perfectly straight and her eyes on the road ahead, but her mind kept wandering back to Theo—how he’d struggled against his desire for her, and then, when he gave in...

She’d caught him looking at her last night, and there had been a reverence in his expression she’d never seen before. It had made the sharp edges inside her grow soft and malleable.

Theo was the opposite of his father. He felt things deeply. He wanted to right all the old duke’s wrongs. He was sweet and kind, but he also challenged her and excited her. He made her want things she’d never dreamed of wanting.

She was beginning to think she might be falling in love with him.

Lord Hawkins stayed by her side throughout the day, eager to run and do her bidding. He acquired extra shot for her when she ran out, and he scampered to fetch her some lemonade when she commented that she was parched.

But she missed Theo. She missed the way the blood rushed through her veins when they were together, the way he made her feel so alive.

Despite Hawkins’s unwanted presence, she tried to focus on the shoot and ended up bagging more birds than the viscount did. It was a hollow victory. It would have been much more fun to compete with Theo.

When they returned to Elder Abbey hours later, Georgiana managed to slip away to hunt for Theo. She found him in the library again, alone. But he wasn’t reading. Instead, he had a glass of amber liquid he was turning thoughtfully in his hand when she opened the door.

He set down the glass and rose to greet her. He stared at her a

moment, seeming to drink her in. As she turned and closed the door behind her, he said her name on a sigh, as if seeing her right now was the highlight of his day.

“I’m sorry I didn’t join the shoot,” he told her now. “I received some news from home I thought was important to address. I’ve spent the day sending letters to my various agents in London and Bedfordshire.”

She stepped forward, her brows drawn together. “What happened?”

He gestured toward one of the seats. As she moved to sit, she noticed that a small pile of letters sat on the table between the two chairs.

“Oh, dear. Please tell me it’s nothing terrible.”

“It’s about the fire in Bromford.” He pushed a weary hand through his hair and sank onto the opposite chair.

Bromford was the village closest to Theo’s lands as well as her father’s. In January, a fire had raged through the smithy and two nearby buildings. No one had died, but several people had been badly burned and were still recovering from the ordeal, and her father had been assisting in the rebuilding efforts.

“Mrs. Battle has succumbed to her wounds.”

“Oh no!” Georgiana exclaimed. “Last I heard, she was well on the way to recovery.” Mrs. Battle was an elderly widow whose upstairs rooms had been destroyed in the fire. She’d escaped, but not without sustaining horrible burns.

“I thought so, too, but evidently a pestilence formed in one of the healed burns.”

“That’s terrible.”

“It is.” Theo sighed.

She reached over and laid her hand over his on the arm of his chair. “Did you know her well?”

“Not very. When I was a boy, she lived at Clairwood Park before she married and moved to the village. She was a

kitchen maid and used to wield a rolling pin to chase Sebastian and me out of the kitchen when we'd sneak in to steal the cook's fruit tarts."

"She was strict with me, too," Georgiana said. "Whenever I saw her in the village, she always used to tell me to straighten my posture and stand tall, like a proper lady."

"Her reminders hit their mark, I see. You always stand tall."

"I try to." She studied him for a moment longer. She wanted to reach forward and smooth out his frown with her fingertips. "There's something else, isn't there?"

He picked up his glass and took a healthy swallow. "Really, that's the worst news and what I should be focusing on. I've sent letters of condolence to her family and have arranged for her burial. But..." He shook his head. "Well, one issue is that I sent my brother to Clairwood Park a week before the house party started. I told him to stay put there until I returned from the party. But he's leaving. Going back to London." He took another drink, then passed her the top letter. "Read it if you like."

She took the sheet of paper from him and unfolded it.

Theo,

Had enough of this place and its various disasters. To add insult to injury, our "esteemed" neighbor is now spreading rumors that I caused old lady Battle's death. I haven't even seen the woman. I did visit the village yesterday morning before she died, but rumors are already going round that she was asking for help from the duke, so you sent me to her, and when I left, she was dead. Implications are I poisoned her. Villagers, tenants, servants—all seem to believe this filth. Their feelings about me were bad enough before, but now I cannot leave my room without people eyeing me as if I'm some kind of devil.

Can't remain in a place where lies are spread like this. Disgusting.

I hate this place. Always have.

Sebastian

P.S.

Sheep have been moved to the northern pasture. Finished that task late this afternoon. Departing for London tonight.

S.

“Oh,” Georgiana whispered. “How can this be, though? My father is not in Bedfordshire. He and my mother are in London and have been all summer.”

“I don’t know,” Theo said. “But my brother appears to believe he is responsible for these rumors.”

Georgiana frowned. “Did you send him to see Mrs. Battle?”

“No. I instructed him to go into the village only to assist Mr. Dunn with his new lodgings.”

“Mrs. Battle is Mr. Dunn’s mother-in-law.”

“She is.”

“So,” Georgiana said, “perhaps your brother encountered her.”

Theo’s eyes narrowed to slits. “What are you implying?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “It’s just nearly impossible to imagine that such a horrid rumor was plucked from thin air.”

He rose slowly, his lips thinning. “Let me make one thing perfectly clear to you, Miss Milford. My brother is not perfect. He has struggled. At times, he has made mistakes. Terrible ones. But he would never harm an innocent. *Ever. Do you understand?*”

Shame heated her face. Why was she defending the rumormongers? Whether the rumors had been started by her father or not, Lord Sebastian had been the subject of terrible gossip. And that wasn’t fair.

“I’m so sorry.” She rose to face Theo. “I didn’t mean to imply he would ever do such a horrible thing. I was only thinking out loud.”

Pushing a frustrated hand through his hair, Theo turned away from her. “I should return home,” he muttered. “I can’t have

people believing this.”

“I’m certain they don’t really believe it. It’s too horrible to even contemplate,” she said quietly.

“And now Sebastian is back in London and unable to defend himself.” Theo groaned softly and stood with slumped shoulders, his back to her. Georgiana walked up to him, slipped her arms around him from behind, and laid her cheek between his shoulder blades, trying to infuse some comfort into him.

It seemed to work, a little. He relaxed slightly under her touch and placed his palm over where her hands were clasped around his middle.

He bowed his head. “Our time here is growing short. We’re going to need to leave soon. Go back to our separate lives.”

“We have a few days.”

“And then...” He hesitated. “We will be forced apart. Once you are back with your parents...”

She closed her eyes and pressed her cheek tighter against his back. “Let’s not think about that now. Let’s just enjoy the time we have left together.”

He turned in her arms, looking down at her with eyes brimming with some emotion she dared not name. “Come to my room.” The demand sent a sparking trail of desire down her spine.

She wanted to. *Lord*, but she wanted to. “Dinner will be served soon. They will be looking for us.”

He released a long breath through his teeth. “After dinner.”

“And there is to be dancing afterward.”

“After the dancing.”

“Yes,” she murmured, staring up into his eyes. “After the dancing.”

Chapter Twenty

Dinner droned on. Dancing droned on...except when Georgiana was dancing with Theo, when it felt like the musicians deliberately truncated their songs to half their length. Though when Georgiana asked Charlotte whether the waltz seemed exceptionally short, Charlotte had claimed that it wasn't.

Georgiana did what was expected of her and danced with every man at the party, even though there was only truly one man she wanted to be touching her. When she was partnered with Lord Hawkins in the country dance, she could feel Theo's hot eyes piercing straight through her. He needn't worry, though. Touching Lord Hawkins was about as repulsive to her as it was for Theo to watch it.

But she executed every touch and dance step with the precision years of practice had bestowed on her. She even forced herself to smile at Hawkins and make polite—albeit aloof—conversation throughout.

“I cannot believe this lovely party will come to an end soon,” he told her at one point.

They parted temporarily to move down the line. When they approached each other again, he said, “I will miss your company. *Deeply.*”

She gritted her teeth and pretended to focus on the dance steps. They separated again, and when they came together, he said, as if he'd just thought up a brilliant idea, “I believe I have a perfect solution to the melancholy of being separated from you, Miss Milford. I'll call upon you when we are back in London. It'll be so fine to be able to see you again. I am already looking forward to it.”

She noted that he hadn't phrased his intention to call upon her as a question—probably because he knew she'd say no. Still. “I'll be quite busy when I return to London, and I will have no time to take callers. Furthermore, after a few weeks, we intend to retire to our country house. Perhaps you and I

will encounter each other during the social season—*next* year.”

He covered up his disappointment quickly, and she could see his scheming mind working to form another idea, but fortunately, the dance ended.

As soon as she moved to the edge of the dance floor, Theo came up beside her and spoke in a low voice into her ear. “Goddamn Hawkins. What did he want?”

“To call upon me in London.”

“What did you say?”

She turned narrowed eyes on him. “What do you *think* I said?”

Seeing her expression of disdain, he laughed softly. “Dance with me, Georgiana.”

“Again?” she murmured.

“Yes. Again.”

They danced the final country dance together; then, as it was very late and everyone was tiring, they danced the Boulanger with all ten of them holding hands in a circle, Theo in the position between her and Charlotte, squeezing her hand tight.

When it was over, Lord Hawkins, who was on her other side, didn’t let her go. Instead, he turned to her and murmured, “Thank you, Miss Milford,” before kissing the top of her gloved hand, his lips lingering until she waged a desperate battle with herself to not cast her eyes heavenward and yank her hand away.

When he finally let her go, Theo’s ominous presence was heavy behind her. The fool was about to utter something overbearing and rude, and she turned forbidding eyes on him. *Don’t you dare.*

He clamped his jaw and said nothing, which made her heart soften.

Everyone retired to their rooms, and Anne came in to help Georgiana prepare for bed. By the time the house went completely quiet, it was nearly two o’clock, but Georgiana

wasn't tired in the least. Instead, a yearning anticipation buzzed through her veins. She stared into the looking glass at her pink cheeks and wide eyes. She looked *alive*. She couldn't wait to be with Theo again.

After Anne left, she stood and, pulling a cloak over her nightgown, slipped out into the corridor. After squinting at both darkened ends of the passageway to make sure no one was lurking about, she knocked softly on the door neighboring hers.

It was opened so quickly, he must have been standing directly in front of it. He took hold of her wrist, pulled her in, closed the door, and crowded her against it. She gasped at the feel of his body, so firm and hard, pressed against her own.

And then he was kissing her, his tongue stroking inside her mouth, his hands roaming up her body beneath the cloak to cup her breasts. His thumbs moved over her nipples in maddening strokes until she was whimpering into his mouth and arching into his hands. "Theo."

"I didn't think I'd survive tonight," he gritted out against her lips. "That dress..." She'd worn a white dress of diaphanous silk threaded with gold this evening. "The way it clung to you...your breasts—" He pinched her nipples lightly, making her suck in a harsh breath.

He moved his hands downward and wrapped them around her waist. "And your delectable little body...your arse..." He moved his hands to her bottom and squeezed, pulling her tighter against his hardness. "And..." He moved one of his hands up to her face, cupping it in his palm, then thrusting his fingers into her hair. "And your hair, tucked up so tightly at the base of your skull. I wanted to pull out the pins one by one and watch it fall over your shoulders all silky and smooth, just as it is now."

He moved his lips to her earlobe and nipped gently as he worked the knot on her cloak and then slipped it off. It pooled on the floor as he murmured, "I couldn't stop looking at you, Georgiana. Wanting you. *Needing* you."

Keeping her pressed against the door, he sank to his knees,

then looked up at her. Lamplight flickered over his flushed cheeks. “I need to taste you.”

Breathless with anticipation, she nodded. She knew how his mouth felt against her lips, her nipples, her skin...

But *there*?

She'd never known that people did that, but in her deepest, most secret fantasies, she'd wondered about it. And now, she wanted it. Wanted that wicked tongue licking her there. Just the thought of it made her throb between her legs.

He rucked her skirt up and up, kissing a path of heat along her thigh as he spread her legs wider apart. And then he pressed his lips to the triangle of hair at her center.

Oh God. It felt so good. Sensation barreled through her, and her legs instantly began to shake. He smoothed his hands over them as if to still them, but it was no use. Her entire body was quaking.

Before she knew it, he'd lifted her and was carrying her across the room. He laid her on the bed and climbed over her, nudging her legs apart until he knelt between them. He bent down and kissed her thoroughly. “God, I love kissing you.”

She moaned her agreement into his mouth. His kisses stole her senses, made her incapable of fluent speech.

He didn't pull back but instead kissed his way down her body as he bunched her nightgown in his fist and moved the soft cotton upward.

With every inch he moved closer to her center, she shuddered harder. He felt it, of course—how could he not? With her thighs pressed to his shoulders, he felt every single tremor. “Shh,” he said. “Relax.” He nibbled the inside of her thigh—oh so very close to that part of her that was aching for him.

But she couldn't relax. Not when she felt his body between her legs, felt the hot washes of his breaths on her skin. He looked up at her, concern darkening the blue of his eyes. “What is it?”

“I just...just...” Her power of speech had long since fled—chased off by the potency of his kisses. “Please,” she groaned desperately.

He frowned, but his fingers still touched her skin, so very close to her center. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No!”

His frown melted away, replaced by something entirely wicked. His voice sounded an octave lower when he said, “Do you want me to kiss you?”

“Yessss,” she hissed out.

“Where?” He kissed the inside of her knee. “Here?”

Well, that was very nice indeed, but— “No.”

“Here?” Moving farther away from where she wanted him, he kissed her shin.

“No!”

He laughed against her leg, and she felt his breaths as he moved up and kissed a spot high on the inside of her thigh. “What about here?” he murmured.

“Nooooo...” She shifted, moving closer in line with his talented mouth.

“Ah,” he said, smug. “I think I know what you want.” He slid his fingertips through her wetness, and she whimpered.

“Yes.” Then, “More.”

He finally obliged her, kissing her center with chaste little kisses over the spots where he stroked her slickness. When she was panting and needy and thoroughly teased, he chased his fingertips with hot swipes of his tongue, murmuring, “You taste...so...damn...good.”

He dipped a finger into her body, stroking deep until she gasped while he kissed her in that oh-so-sensitive place that made fire build within her. He moved in and out before he added a second finger, stretching her deliciously to accommodate them.

He curved his fingertips as he thrust them into her, touching her inside in a way that made her writhe as he flicked his tongue over the spot above his fingers. Again and again, he pushed into her, driving her quickly to an edge of a cliff and then relentlessly thrusting her over. She cried out, her body thrashing as delirious waves of pleasure took hold of every bit of her.

...

Theo awoke with a start to the muffled sounds of voices. He and Georgiana were wrapped in each other's arms, and, once again, they'd fallen asleep and slept soundly for...well, God knew how long. But daylight was already burning through the curtains.

People were talking—loudly—in the corridor. Beside him, Georgiana shifted, blinking sleepily. “What...?”

“Shh.” He kissed her lightly on the lips but tightened his arms around her and listened intently. He couldn't discern who was speaking, but the voices sounded deeply concerned. He stiffened when there was a rap on his door.

“Ridge, are you in there?” It was Trevelyan's voice.

“Oh no,” Georgiana whispered, her eyes going wide. “What's hap—”

“Stay here,” he murmured, then turned his head toward the door and spoke loudly. “Just a moment, Trev.”

He disentangled himself from Georgiana and slid off the bed. She lay stiffly under the counterpane, her eyes wide with panic. Quickly pulling on a shirt and a pair of trousers, he opened the door a crack and peered out. “What is it?”

Trevelyan wasn't the only one in the corridor. Behind him, a group huddled—the Merricks, along with a man Theo didn't recognize until...

Cold hazel eyes landed on him and widened in surprise before narrowing into slits. Theo's heart sank.

“You,” the man growled. “What are *you* doing here?”

It was Thomas Milford, Georgiana's father.

Chapter Twenty-One

With the counterpane pulled up past her nose, Georgiana watched Theo, who stood at the door murmuring in a low voice. Something about his posture struck her as very wrong. The door was only open an inch, but she stayed stock still. If she moved at all, someone might see her from the corridor.

They'd stayed up for hours last night alternately talking and then pleasuring each other. He'd brought her to her peak four times, each more powerful than the last, and she'd returned his attentions twice, first with her hand, then using her mouth and tongue to stroke him to release.

That had been... Well, she could not have thought of anything better. Exploring the texture of him, the taste of him. And then watching how it affected him when she licked over his crown, or when she swallowed his cock deep into her mouth. There was little in life that she'd found more satisfying than seeing the imperturbable Duke of Desborough brought to his knees, both literally and figuratively. Of course, he'd done the same thing to her. There was no doubt he possessed a singular power over her. And she over him.

After a few seconds of speaking in a low voice to whoever was outside, he closed the door, then locked it. He turned and strode toward her, fetching her cloak from the floor on the way.

When he reached the bed, he leaned down to speak quietly. "Your parents are here."

"What?"

"Shh." He pressed his fingers to her lips. "Your parents are here and they are looking for you. In fact, the entire household is looking for you. It is eleven in the morning."

She gasped. "Surely not."

She slipped out of bed as he went to fetch his pocket watch, which did, indeed, show that it was a little before eleven. They'd slept in to a truly ungodly hour, but then again, why

was she so surprised? There was nothing like falling asleep in Theo's arms, her body wrung out with pleasure.

“What are we going to do?” she asked, her heart pounding in panic. What on earth were her parents doing all the way out in Derbyshire? She was supposed to join them in Southampton to meet Lizzie's ship from Nova Scotia, but that wasn't for another six days.

Theo thought for a moment. “I'll go divert them. Meanwhile, go to your room and get yourself dressed”—he frowned—“will you be all right doing that?”

“I'll have to be,” she said.

“Then come back downstairs,” he said. “When you encounter someone, say you were coming back from a morning walk along the Castleton Road and time got away from you.”

She nodded. Her parents wouldn't have arrived from that direction, and that road had been relatively empty on the morning they'd gone to the cavern. “But wouldn't someone have seen me if that were the case?”

“We'll just have to assume that it was by random chance that no one did,” he said.

“All right.”

“Allow at least a quarter of an hour for everyone to be scattered in the back before you come down.”

“That should be easy,” she said.

He gripped her shoulders and gave her a hard kiss. “Give me five minutes to clear the corridor.”

She nodded and kissed him back, equally hard. “Go.”

He yanked on his clothing and ran his fingers through his hair. He looked somewhat less perfectly composed than usual, and he was unshaven, but there was something maddeningly handsome about his dishabille.

After gathering her in his arms, squeezing her tightly, and kissing the top of her head, he slipped out.

Something told her that quick, desperate squeeze he'd given her might have been a goodbye. Because even if Georgiana's father didn't discover their secret, her parents' presence here changed everything. There would be no more languorous nights in each other's beds, no more kisses in a library with an unlocked door.

Georgiana paced, listening for sounds outside. They had been reckless. Last night, between the talking, holding, and loving, she hadn't spared one thought to vigilance. But if her father discovered that she'd been in Theo's room... She shuddered. Blood would be shed.

Lord. What a nightmare.

She stopped pacing and pressed her ear to the door. No lingering sounds came from the corridor, but she listened for another two minutes, just to be sure.

All was quiet outside.

Slowly, carefully, she opened the door and looked out into the dim corridor lit only by the tall windows at each end. Far on the other end, near the library, a curtain fluttered, but that was only because someone had opened the window to let in some air. Holding her breath, she slipped out, the *click* of the door sounding loud in the hush. Then she hurried the few steps to her own room and bolted the door behind her.

She'd never gotten dressed so efficiently. Shift, stays, petticoat, white walking dress with yellow trim. Half boots that were far too clean to have been tromping across the countryside for hours. Then...her hair. She'd never been very good at doing her own hair, but she plaited it, twisted it into a low knot, and pinned it. She looked at herself in the mirror. It was clear her coiffure didn't have Anne's deft touch, but she could say she'd arisen early and hadn't wanted to bother her maid, as she had been planning on returning to the abbey before anyone awoke.

This was a terrible fabrication. She'd woken early, left her lady's maid asleep, gone for a long walk alone in a strange place, and had lost track of time...for hours?

Surely no one would believe her. How could they? But the question was, would they have the impudence to question her?

Her parents might.

It had been twenty minutes. She needed to go downstairs. Looking in the mirror, she straightened a strand of hair that had gone askew and pinned it back. Then, she took a deep breath. “You can do this, Georgiana.”

Straightening her spine, she left her room and went downstairs. At the bottom of the staircase, in the entry hall, she encountered the housekeeper, Mrs. Smith, who bobbed a curtsy. “Miss Milford! The household has been looking for you.”

She frowned and feigned ignorance. “Have they?”

“They have indeed. They thought you might be lost.”

“Oh dear. I wasn’t lost—I just went for a walk.” She glanced around. “Where is everyone?”

The housekeeper gestured in the direction of the conservatory. “They went to search for you outside.”

“I’ll go inform them I have been found, then,” Georgiana said.

“Very well, miss.”

Georgiana hurried through the conservatory, and the moment she stepped out into the gloomy day, Charlotte, who was on the edge of the lawn near the bowling green, spotted her. “There you are!”

Charlotte picked up her skirts and dashed toward her. Georgiana met her on the lawn. “Where on earth were you?” Charlotte said breathlessly, gripping her upper arms.

“I went for a walk, and—”

Charlotte barely seemed to hear her. “Your parents are here! They came up to surprise you so you could all travel to Southampton together.”

Georgiana frowned, trying to act surprised at their appearance yet concerned about them learning about Theo.

“Oh! Oh dear. I hope they weren’t too worried.”

Charlotte linked her arm with Georgiana’s and spoke in a low voice. “They have already discovered Ridge’s presence. I need to warn you. They are quite unhappy about it.”

Georgiana couldn’t answer her as people were suddenly approaching from all sides. From the corner of her eye, Georgiana saw Theo but studiously kept her gaze away from him. And then everyone was talking and exclaiming all at once, and Georgiana was greeting her parents and apologizing for the disturbance she’d caused. “The countryside is so pretty—time just ran away from me!”

Lady Merrick said they’d best hurry in to escape the oncoming deluge, since it looked like the heavens were going to open at any moment. She ushered everyone back inside to gather in the drawing room and enjoy a bit of tea.

Georgiana wound her arm in her father’s, as she did every time they saw each other after a time apart. Her mother kissed her on the cheek, but there was a telltale groove between her brows.

Something was wrong, and Georgiana knew exactly what it was.

“We need to talk,” her father said. “Just the three of us.”

“Of course, Papa.” She kept her voice warm and accommodating. “Perhaps we could make use of the conservatory for a few moments.”

They hung back as the rest of the group passed through the conservatory, and when Lady Merrick turned to ask if they would be joining everyone for tea, Georgiana said, “We thought we’d speak here for a moment, if that’s all right with you.”

“Of course,” Lady Merrick said. “I’ll send an extra pot to you.”

“Thank you, Lady Merrick,” Georgiana’s mother said.

As soon as the door closed, leaving them in the glass room by themselves, the tension grew thick enough to be cut with a

knife. After gesturing to the table, Georgiana sat, smoothing her skirts while her father took a seat in stony silence. Mama flittered from plant to plant, seeming too wrought with nerves to sit.

Georgiana decided to speak. There was no need to play dumb. She knew exactly why they were upset with her. “You’re angry.” She folded her hands in her lap.

Her father huffed out a breath. “Angry? No. Confused and concerned? Mightily. And where were you when we arrived?” His brow furrowed. “We arrive at nearly noon, and the despot is still abed while our daughter is nowhere to be found—”

“I went for a walk.” Georgiana’s voice was sharper than she’d intended. “That’s all.”

She’d never lied to her parents. Not before Theo had made an appearance in her life. But the truth would destroy everything. Not to mention that it was special. Her connection with another person, their private moments together. Even if her parents would accept the truth, she couldn’t—wouldn’t—share it.

“A walk, eh?” Her father studied her as if he could see straight through her.

“Yes. A walk. I did not know you would be arriving. If I had, I would have been at the abbey, waiting for you.”

“We meant to surprise you!” Mama clutched her hands together at her chest.

“Well, you succeeded in that,” Georgiana said in a low voice.

“We had no idea that the Duke of Desborough was here,” her father said darkly. “Why didn’t you inform us of that fact?”

Georgiana hesitated, then spoke truthfully. “Because I knew that if I told you he was here, you’d force me to come home, and I didn’t wish to come home.”

Her father seemed bewildered. “Why would you even desire to go within fifty feet of the man, given everything you know about him?”

“I didn’t do it on purpose, Papa. I didn’t know that the duke

was invited to the party. In point of fact, I don't believe he actually *was* formally invited."

"But—" her mother started, but Georgiana continued. "I wasn't formally invited, either, or certainly he would have known I'd be in attendance and wouldn't have come. As it was, we discovered each other's presence only after we both arrived."

"Why didn't you leave immediately?" her father asked.

"I thought about it. So did he."

"Oh goodness!" her mother exclaimed. "How on earth could you know that man's *thoughts*?"

"He told me, Mama."

Her mother clutched her throat and stared at her with wide eyes. "You've *spoken* to him?"

"They are in attendance at the same small house party, Eliza," Papa said. "It seems to me their speaking to each other was inevitable. As distressing as that is." He looked like he was on the verge of being ill. Her mother melted into one of the chairs as if she no longer had the strength to stand.

Her father shook his head, and his shoulders sagged. "Your entire life, I've tried to keep you safe from him, and now—"

"I have not been unsafe in the least," she said soothingly. Although, if her father knew what had *really* happened...

Well, she couldn't even contemplate that.

"Why, Gigi?" Her mother moaned. "Why didn't you come home straightaway when you laid eyes on that man?"

"As I said, I thought about it."

"But why *didn't* you?"

She wouldn't say that Charlotte had convinced her not to go. That would reduce Charlotte in their eyes, and she couldn't have that. "I wanted to stay. I dearly needed the time away from London." She turned to her father. "You *know* that I did, Papa."

He just looked at her, worry twisting his expression.

“And over the past few days, I’ve grown to know the duke a little,” she said. “He’s not as terrible as you think.”

Her parents stared at her as if she’d said something completely nonsensical.

“He’s nothing like his father. He’s going to be a good neighbor to us, now that he’s the duke,” Georgiana insisted. “Can you deny the improvements he’s already made to Clairwood Park?”

Her father ran a hand through his thinning hair. “I know that under his orders, his workers are constantly encroaching on our property, making an undue amount of noise, and ruining our view of the countryside. Further, there has been a crisis in the village over the past few days, and he has done nothing to acknowledge it. In fact, I have it on good authority that he *caused* it.”

“Are you referring to poor Mrs. Battle?”

“And her son, James.”

Georgiana frowned. “What do you mean? Has something happened to Mr. Battle as well?”

“Mrs. Battle perished under mysterious circumstances after a visit from Lord Sebastian St. Clair, the duke’s brother. Two days later, her son died suddenly as well. The village is in an uproar over the mysterious deaths, but the duke hasn’t been seen or heard from in weeks—because evidently he’s galivanting around the countryside at this house party instead of handling the chaos in his home community—and his brother slipped away under cover of night directly after Mrs. Battle’s death.”

Oh no. Georgiana groaned. “His Grace is not to blame for their deaths. Nor has he ignored the situation.”

“At the least, the duke is irresponsible.” Her father sighed. “At the most, he is a dangerous murderer who had the Battles killed because they were outspoken against him and rallying to my side.”

Georgiana gasped. “That is utter nonsense.”

“Of course, we rushed to Norton House to do what we could to help the family as soon as we heard the terrible news about Mrs. Battle.” Georgiana’s mother shook her head and looked down at her hands wringing on her lap. “We arrived on the day Mr. Battle collapsed. The situation is truly dire. Across the countryside, people fear they’ll be targeted by the St. Clairs next. We have tried to comfort them as best we could, but then we got word that the Atlantic winds have been favorable and Elizabeth’s ship might arrive early, so we decided to come to fetch you and take you to Southampton.”

“Wait a moment,” Georgiana said. “Surely you didn’t encourage the villagers to suspect the St. Clairs! Surely you told everyone that they couldn’t have had anything to do with what happened to the Battles. We all knew that Mrs. Battle suffered terrible injuries from the fire and that her wounds didn’t heal properly—”

Her father leaned forward, his face a mask of despair. “Clearly, I have not adequately imparted to you the depths of the depravity the St. Clairs will sink to, Georgiana! They are fully capable of ‘disposing’ of those who will oppose them.”

“Give me evidence, then,” Georgiana challenged. “Tell me something they have actually done, something that has been proven to be true, to make you feel this way about them.”

“The previous duke—”

“*Not* the previous duke, Papa! The current duke.” When her father just pressed his lips together mulishly, she said, “Or even his brother. I know Lord Sebastian has been a rake about town. He gambles and drinks. But that describes half the gentlemen of the ton, most of whom you’ve approved to court me. What, exactly, has Lord Sebastian done to make you feel he could be capable of *murder*?”

A part of her couldn’t even fathom the fact that she was having this conversation. Theo, ordering a villager killed? That was preposterous.

She thought of his desire to improve Clairwood Park, to

make it a place of light and happiness, to bring the community together. How could that ever happen if the residents thought such things of him? If her parents, whom everyone admired and respected, promoted such thoughts?

She finally understood Theo's expression of despair whenever he talked about home. How desperate he was to fix his status in the community but how impossible it must feel. The battle he fought was steep.

And the people sitting in front of her had made it steeper.

"Lord Sebastian is capable of anything. They all are," her father said darkly.

"What makes you believe this?"

Her father glanced at her mother, who shook her head slightly. They returned their gazes to her, both their jaws clamped.

Something more had happened between them and the St. Clairs. Something Georgiana didn't know about. And they had no intention of telling her.

"What is it?" she demanded, already knowing it was fruitless.

"It doesn't matter," Papa said. "They have committed offenses too awful to repeat. Too horrible for your ears. You must respect that. You must understand, Georgiana, that we have given you these warnings over the years to protect you because you are so dear to us."

"I know, Papa," she said softly. "But—"

"The St. Clairs are bad. Bad to their rotten cores. *All* of them."

"*No*," she insisted. "The old duke might have been despicable. I don't know Lord Sebastian. But I can say with utmost confidence that you are treating the new duke unfairly."

Her mother covered her face with her hands. "Oh, Lord. I cannot believe you are defending them."

“I have spent several days in the duke’s company. I know him.”

“The St. Clairs are capable of immense charm.” Mama lowered her hands to reveal shining blue eyes. “That is how they ensnare people in their traps.”

Papa held his hand up and regarded her suspiciously. “Wait just a moment. Has he made advances, Georgiana?”

She caught her breath, and she saw the moment both her parents saw the truth in her face. Her mother gasped in horror. Her father caught her shoulder in a tight grip, slightly shaking. “You know what he wants from you, don’t you? He’s after your inheritance. He’s after *my* fortune. His estate is on the verge of ruin—”

“That’s not true!” she managed.

“—and he wants the one thing the St. Clairs have wanted for the past two decades!” Panic made her father’s voice shake. “Everything that belongs to me. *Everything.*”

“No, Papa,” Georgiana whispered.

“Think of...” Her father blinked and looked away. In a quieter voice, he said, “Think of all the women...ladies...the old duke had in that house—” He broke off, swallowing hard.

Despite her conviction, doubt flashed through Georgiana. Had Theo been using her like the previous duke had used so many women before tossing them aside when someone new came along?

She thrust that thought away. No. She’d said it over and over again in her mind and out loud, and she knew it was true. Theo was nothing like his father.

What she and Theo had... It was real. It was honest.

It was the most real and honest thing she’d ever known.

She...

Oh good Lord. She loved him. She was in love with the Duke of Desborough. She was in love with Theophilus St. Clair of the pretentious given name.

She loved Theo. She loved everything about him. His caring—not rotten—core. How he looked at her, with passion, with...yes...*adoration*. How he laughed with her and how he argued with her. She was even in love with that cold, careless mask he sometimes wore.

She wasn't certain he loved her, but he cared for her and respected her. How he touched her, stroked her. How he teased her and challenged her and provoked her.

She knew Theo. Charlotte and Lord Trevelyan had been right about him—he was worth her regard. He was worth *everything*.

And if she was forced to choose between him and the stubbornly closed-minded couple sitting across from her, the people who had raised her and loved her and supported her throughout her entire life...

She loved Theo.

She'd choose him.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Theo didn't see Georgiana all day. Even though it was raining and the party had elected to remain indoors, every time he entered a room, Georgiana's parents left it with Georgiana in tow.

They hadn't turned her against him, though. Thank God. The warm glances she sent his way spoke volumes.

She missed him, too.

She wanted to be with him.

Theo hardly joined in the conversations that buzzed around him. His thoughts were occupied with Georgiana.

The truth was, he didn't want her to go. He wanted her in his life. Permanently.

He wanted to marry her.

He'd never spent much time contemplating marriage or put much thought into the kind of woman he'd like to be his wife. He'd only known he'd never met anyone he wanted to be a part of his life like that.

Now, he knew. Without a shred of doubt, he knew he wanted Georgiana. He wanted her forever. Day in and day out. In his life, in his home, in his bed. He wanted her sharp tongue and her smile and her soft touch. He wanted her challenging him and fighting with him and laughing with him and standing at his side. He wanted to forge that bond between them and make what they had together permanent and indelible under the eyes of God and society.

In the afternoon, he received word from Bedfordshire. Mr. Battle, the elderly Mrs. Battle's son, had collapsed and died mysteriously three days ago. Smythe had passed on the news that rumors were running rampant that Sebastian had something to do with it.

Theo needed to return to Clairwood Park as soon as possible. Do something—though he had no idea what—to dispel that

awful rumor. But the thought of going back there alone, without Georgiana...

He definitely needed to return to Bedfordshire, but he wanted Georgiana to be at his side when he did it.

Of course, Thomas Milford would forbid her from marrying him. Milford would believe Theo was after her inheritance, or maybe he'd even believe something more nefarious than that. But Theo also knew Georgiana. Her father was an ass, but he'd raised his daughter to think for herself. She was a woman who knew her own mind.

Theo didn't know for certain if Georgiana wanted him in the same way he wanted her. And even if she did, there were other obstacles, too, like the work she did for her father. If they married, Milford might not only disinherit her, but he might also refuse to allow her to continue to work for him.

Would she be willing to give it up for Theo? Theo hoped so, but a part of him worried she wouldn't. He knew she liked him. But would she be willing to sacrifice the life she loved to be with her beloved father's enemy?

Late that night, when the house was finally quiet, he went out into the corridor, checking both ends of it before knocking softly on her door.

She answered it immediately, and when he was inside, she wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his chest. "I missed you."

He held her close, breathing in the scent of roses. "I missed you, too. So much."

She pulled back slightly and looked up at him. "We are leaving in the morning. My father wishes to hurry to Southampton so we can be certain to be there for Lizzie's arrival."

Panic rushed through him, the arrow piercing his heart forcing him to plead, "Don't go."

"I...I have to."

Slowly, he shook his head. "No. You don't." He sank to one

knee, stroking down her arms until he grasped both her hands. “Come with me instead.” His voice sounded far-off and strange. He’d made this decision only this afternoon, and he felt disembodied somehow, like this was a wavering dream.

But as he gazed at the woman he loved and she stared down at him with that furrow between her brow that was growing so familiar to him, the world around him settled. This was no dream. This was reality. And the reality was that he wanted Georgiana Milford, and he needed to tell her that.

“I’ve fallen in love with you. I cannot stand the thought of you being torn away from my side.” He swallowed hard. “I think we belong together. I think you make me into a better man, and I think I have never been happier or more at peace than I have been these past days with you.”

He watched her take in his words, her lips parted, her wide eyes a soft, mossy green.

“Marry me, Georgiana. Be my wife. I vow I will do everything in my power to make you the happiest woman alive.”

“Theo,” she breathed. “I...” She blinked over glassy eyes and squeezed his hands tighter. “I just realized today...being apart from you, knowing that I might never be able to be with you again... I love you, too. Being your wife... I cannot imagine anything I’ve ever wanted more.”

Oh God. That meant...

It meant she’d said yes. She would marry him.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he rose and gathered her into his arms. She let him, and they stayed locked together for just a moment before she pulled back. “But...you’ll allow me to be *me*, won’t you? Tell me you won’t dictate my life to me, that you won’t force me to stop working in fashion, that you—”

He pressed a finger to her lips. “You’d slice me in two if I ever attempted to do that. I love you for you. I want you for you. I want you as you are, and I would never strangle your passions or try to stifle you.”

She sank into him again. Against his chest, her voice

muffled, she said, “My father might disown me, you know. Would you still want to marry me, even if I were as poor as a dairymaid?”

He chuckled. “Perhaps even more.”

She pulled back, frowning. “Why more?”

“Because then you would reap some benefit from marrying me.” He shrugged. “As it stands, I fear you being with me will only cause heartbreak for you.”

“Because of how my parents are going to respond?”

He nodded.

A muscle jumped in her jaw as her eyes narrowed. “That is not my fault, and it is not yours. It is my parents’ fault for not seeing you as you truly are.”

His eyes closed again as he basked in her approval, in the fact that, finally, she really did see him for who he was—not the Duke of Despots’ evil son, but as Theo. The man who was trying to right his father’s wrongs. Who wanted to live quietly in a contented community among people who accepted him for the man he was.

Thank God she’d be there with him now. Confidence straightened his spine. With a woman like Georgiana at his side, he could accomplish anything.

Still...he shook his head slightly. “Your parents love you, and you love them. This is going to be difficult—probably impossible—for them to accept. You might lose them forever.”

He watched her carefully as emotions played over her face. She gripped his hands tightly. “I’ve been in my parents’ company all day,” she said in a low voice. “It gave me ample time to consider the situation. I came to the conclusion that if they force me to choose, Theo, I choose you.”

Her statement stole his breath and weakened his knees. She chose *him*.

But the guilt of dragging her from her loving family still niggled at him as she continued. “I refuse to blindly follow the rantings of narrow-minded people anymore. It’s not to say I

don't love them. I do. Dearly. But if they are so biased against you that they refuse to see you for who you really are, and if they reject me for loving the man you are, I cannot stop them."

"Georgiana—"

"I know my heart, Theo. And my heart is here." She pressed her palm to his chest. "I will endeavor to change their minds, but if they refuse, then—" She blinked hard. "Yes. That heart will break a little, but you must help me to mend it."

"Always," he whispered, pulling her in and kissing the top of her head.

She wrapped her arms around him. "But what are we going to do?" she asked, her voice muffled against his chest. "I'm to leave with them early tomorrow morning. And I fear that if I go with them now, they will move heaven and earth to keep you away from me."

"Then don't go with them."

"But my sister..."

"We will go to London and obtain a special license to marry. Then, when the deed is done, we'll visit your sister."

Slowly, she nodded. "They might try to prevent me from seeing her, but we are both women full grown. They cannot control who I see."

"Especially since your father will no longer have any legal power over you. You will see whoever you want, whenever you like."

"Papa has held legal power over me all my life," she mused. "When we marry, I'll technically be handing that power from him to you."

She looked Theo in the eye, and he understood the precious gift she was offering him. She trusted him not to abuse that power. He would never take that trust lightly.

"It might not be 'legal' in terms of the law, Georgiana, but I vow that I will never attempt to control you or your actions." He kissed her cheek. "Except, perhaps, once in a while..." Her eyes flared in alarm, and he finished, "In our bed."

The alarm transformed instantly to interest, then curiosity. Oh, she still had so much to learn.

He kissed her again. “But never outside our bedchamber. I vow it, upon my honor as a gentleman.”

She smiled at him. “Very well. Tomorrow, I will leave Elder Abbey. But not with my parents. With you.”

He smiled right back at her. “I wonder how long that bit of prime gossip will remain at the house party.”

“I’d give it...oh, about thirty seconds.”

Which meant that tomorrow the world would know that the Duke of Desborough intended to make Georgiana Milford his bride.

Chapter Twenty-Three

At seven o'clock the following morning, Georgiana opened her door to see Theo standing at her threshold. "You're up early."

Theo had remained in her bed for a long while last night. They'd touched and kissed, giving each other pleasure as they had the previous two evenings. But both of them had been too anxious to fall asleep afterward, and in the early hours of the morning, Theo had returned to his room in the hopes of hanging on to at least a shred of propriety.

He slipped inside, locked the door, and drew her into his arms. "Couldn't sleep."

"I couldn't, either," she said. Not well, anyhow. She was riddled with a strange combination of worry, excitement, and nerves. They'd decided last night that she wouldn't leave her parents with deception. She'd tell them her plans.

There would be a terrible row—of that, she had no doubt. Before yesterday, she'd never argued with her parents.

Hence, the nerves.

Theo put a knuckle under her chin and lifted her face, then kissed her. A gentle brush of lips that lingered, sending threads of calm through her.

They loved each other. What they were doing was right and good, no matter what her parents might say.

The doorknob rattled, and when the person on the other side of it realized it was locked, they rapped on the door. As Theo and Georgiana drew apart, her mother's voice sounded on the other side. "Gigi? Gigi, darling, are you awake?"

"We'll be departing within the hour," her father called.

Theo pressed his forehead to hers, and they took a fraction of a moment to share a breath.

Then, she whispered, "It's time."

“Yes.” He threaded his fingers in hers. As one, they turned to the door, and Theo opened it.

She watched her parents’ faces change as they saw first that Georgiana wasn’t alone, then took in the identity of the man standing beside her, and finally realized that their hands were clasped together.

Papa’s face reddened, reminding her of the tomato Theo had taken a bite from a few days ago.

“Oh...*oh*.” Mama clutched her throat. She couldn’t seem to give voice to any other word.

Papa stepped forward. Georgiana had never seen him look menacing in his life, but he did now. “Unhand my daughter, Desborough.”

She tightened her hand in Theo’s and stood straighter. “Papa, I will not be accompanying you to Southampton.”

He turned to her, eyes blazing. “*What did you say?*”

She spoke very clearly. “I will not be accompanying you to Southampton. The duke and I are to be married.”

Her mother gasped. Her father’s eyes looked like they were going to burst from his skull.

“We will be returning to London. We will call upon you and Lizzie in a few days.”

Papa’s cheeks flamed. Energy bristled off his skin. He swung his enraged gaze to Theo, and his hands clamped into such tight fists, it flashed through her that, though her father was a mild-tempered man who never hurt a fly, he might actually hit Theo.

Good Lord—he *was* going to hit Theo. His arm was rearing back in a blur of motion, and she swung her body in front of her intended.

“Don’t you dare raise your hand to him, Papa!” she bellowed, arms raised to protect them both.

Her father froze, fist raised. Surely, she’d awakened the entire household with her shout. But she kept going, the words

coming out in furious declarations even as she knew they'd crack her parents' hearts wide open. "I love him! I love the Duke of Desborough, and I'm going to marry him, and nothing, *nothing* you say or do is going to change that!"

Across the corridor, the door to Charlotte and Lord Trevelyan's room swung open, but she kept her focus on the man standing in her doorway.

Beside him, her mother burst into tears. Georgiana watched the blood drain from her father's face. "No," her father croaked. "I cannot...will not allow this."

"You have no choice."

He staggered a bit, gripping the doorframe as if he needed it to support himself. "No, Gigi. Please."

She glanced at Theo, who'd moved beside her again. His lips were tight, his eyes flinty, his face an emotionless mask.

"I am going to make Georgiana my duchess." His voice had taken on that quality of the uncaring aristocrat. He raised an imperious brow at her father. "*You* cannot stop it."

She hadn't given any consideration to the title she'd acquire when she agreed to marry Theo.

Duchess.

The Duchess of Desborough... How strange that would be.

"Noooo!" her mother wailed, sinking to her knees, her head in her hands and her shoulders heaving.

Georgiana huffed out a breath and stepped over to help her mother back to her feet. "I beg you, Mama, dispense with the dramatics. Please, go on to Southampton as you planned." People were gathering on both ends of the corridor, but Georgiana didn't look at them. "We will see you upon your return to London. We'll work everything out then. We are guests in this house, so this is neither the time nor the place for ___"

"If you pursue this course, you will be disowned, Georgiana," her father interrupted, his voice a hoarse rasp. She spun to face him, and the look on his face... God, she'd never

seen such an expression from him before. A potent mix of sheer devastation and boiling rage. “You will never step foot into my home or my places of business.”

She could see the pleading desperation in his eyes, despite the harshness of what he’d just said.

He reminded her of a cornered animal taking his last snapping bite, one last strike at the predator who was about to devour him. Her chest panged. She knew how deeply this cut him. She and Theo had predicted this, but a part of her—a completely unrealistic part, she realized now—had held out hope that her father would understand.

There was no understanding in his shattered gaze.

“I see, Papa.” Each word felt like it lashed at her chest. “If that is what you wish.”

Pure surprise splashed across his face—he hadn’t expected her to give everything up so easily, but she needed him to know that her level of commitment to Theo was such that she *would* give it all up without so much as a flinch.

Her father turned to Theo, dropping his hand from the doorframe and seeming to find strength in his hatred of the man she loved. “My daughter will sacrifice everything for which she has existed over the past quarter of a century, but what about you? What will you do when you understand that you will not get a penny from her?”

“The size of Georgiana’s inheritance makes no difference to me.” Theo’s voice was so cold it sent a chill down her spine.

Georgiana didn’t know if it was her imagination, but the crowd seemed to be closing in. She shifted closer to Theo, and he took her hand again and squeezed, the only evidence that he was experiencing any sort of sentiment. His outward expression was a hard sheet of ice.

Papa’s narrow-eyed gaze shot daggers at Theo. “You’re a liar. You will ruin her—you *have* ruined her—and then you’ll leave her bereft. That’s what you St. Clairs do. You—”

“Thomas!” Mama choked. Wildly, she glanced around at the assembly, then clutched at his arm. “Don’t. Please.”

Papa snapped his mouth shut. He looked at Georgiana one last time. “Gigi. Come with me now.”

It was a final plea. He begged her with his eyes.

She held on to Theo, her lifeline, even tighter. “I love him, Papa.”

Her father closed his eyes in a long blink. When he opened them, he looked old and defeated. “Come, Eliza,” he told her mother wearily. “It is time to go.”

He clasped his wife’s arm and led her to the landing. With the entire house party watching, they descended the stairs with rounded shoulders and bowed heads, neither of them looking back.

...

The encounter with Georgiana’s parents was no more or less than Theo had expected, but it still left him feeling like an open wound. Georgiana must have felt far worse. After they left, he’d taken her back into her room and shut the door on the curious eyes out in the corridor. He’d held her while she wept.

He knew how this hurt her. He hurt *for* her.

Maybe they should have waited until he’d proven himself. Until everyone in Bedfordshire knew his intentions were honest, that he cared. Until Milford accepted him.

But that day would never come.

All he wanted was Georgiana. Yet, a strange thing was happening inside him. Her pain, her loss, had become his own. He squeezed his eyes shut against the deep ache in his heart and held her tighter.

When she had stopped crying but still clung to him, a soft knock sounded on the door. “Georgiana? Ridge? It’s Charlotte and Finn. May we speak with you?”

Georgiana pulled back, her eyes slightly red. She was more beautiful to him than ever. “We should let them in.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, tucking a lock of blond hair behind her ear.

She nodded.

He went to the door and opened it. Charlotte hurried straight to Georgiana and wrapped her arms around her, while Trevelyan hung back. When Theo closed the door behind them, Trevelyan got straight to the point. “Are you heading directly to London?”

Theo nodded. “As soon as we can gather our things and the carriage is readied.”

Something niggled, deep inside him. That ever-present guilt, telling him he was running from his problems. Yet again.

That wasn't true. This was different. This was fighting for someone he loved.

For her benefit or yours? the voice inside him asked. He thrust it away.

“And you intend to obtain a special license?” Trevelyan asked.

Theo nodded. “As soon as we arrive.”

“Very well. We'll go with you.”

Theo looked at him in surprise.

“The two of you don't need any more drama,” Charlotte said. “The road you intend to travel is going to be difficult enough with Mr. Milford's censure on such public display. If you journey alone to London, that will only make it worse. The gossipmongers will be ruthless.”

She was right, Theo realized.

“Therefore,” she finished firmly, “we will all ride together and ensure this journey to London is a proper and respectable one.”

Georgiana squeezed her friend tightly, and Theo clasped Trevelyan's broad shoulder.

There was little in the world better than loyal, supportive

friends.

Two hours later, the four of them were ensconced in Trevelyan's carriage, intending to send for Theo's and Georgiana's carriages later—though Georgiana's carriage technically belonged to her father. They'd deliver it to his house when it arrived, Theo decided.

The servants climbed onto the boot, the coachman climbed onto his perch, and the conveyance jerked into motion. A few minutes later, they turned south.

Theo should have relaxed then. After all, he was surrounded by supportive friends, and Georgiana was at his side. But after that scene with her parents, tension radiated across his shoulders, and the reality of what he'd just done sank in.

He had taken Georgiana from all she'd ever known. A position that satisfied her passion. A family that adored her. From comfort and love and security. And now, he had brought her into his fraught, stress-filled battle of an existence.

They were meant to be together. They loved each other. He knew that.

Yet, how could he live with himself, dragging her away from the life that had made her happy?

Chapter Twenty-Four

They made good time, and when they stopped at the Saracen's Head Inn—a ghastly name for a comfortable place to spend an evening, if you were to ask Georgiana—they'd traveled over a hundred miles, more than halfway to London.

After long hours of alternately gripping Theo's hand, lapsing into silence as she thought about the horrible way she and her parents had separated, and answering Charlotte and Lord Trevelyan's questions about the development of their affections and their future plans, Georgiana was exhausted.

Tomorrow afternoon, they'd arrive in London. They'd go straight to Doctors Commons and apply for the special license, find a clergyman to marry them, and have the ceremony at Theo's house either tomorrow night or the following morning.

She'd be a duchess soon. It was happening so fast, Georgiana felt like the world was spinning around her out of control.

She and Theo had dived headfirst into this plan, and while it felt reckless, almost unhinged, she knew it was right. Theo had been beside her all day. Holding her hand, giving her tender looks, voicing his support and affection for her in every way possible. She loved him. And despite the chaos and the certain loss of her family, thoughts of her future with him kept her solid in her determination.

At the inn, Georgiana was given the room adjoining Charlotte and Lord Trevelyan's. She didn't know where Theo's room was, but after Charlotte's maid helped Georgiana with her clothes, she'd fallen into bed. Exhausted from the draining day, she'd descended into a deep, dreamless slumber. She woke the next morning to Charlotte knocking at her door and a deep sense of rightness in her chest accompanied by a blossoming sense of hope. After she and Theo were married, everything would be all right. They loved each other. They would be happy together. Things would settle down, and maybe someday Mama and Papa would accept him.

The day started with a hearty breakfast followed by their departure from the inn. They hurried through the rain to the carriage, and when they were settled inside, Charlotte said, “Eighty miles to London. Not so bad, right?”

They plodded along at a relatively good pace through the morning hours, but the rain kept coming down, and by ten o’clock, it had turned to a deluge, the drops pounding on the carriage roof, and they were all being bounced from side to side as the carriage jerked over the pits in the road.

“The poor servants,” Charlotte exclaimed, referring not only to the coachman but also to her maid and Theo’s valet, who were riding on the boot. “They will be drenched!”

“And chilled to the bone,” Georgiana added. “Perhaps we shouldn’t push all the way to London after all. I wouldn’t want them to fall ill.”

As they debated the idea, the carriage groaned loudly and dipped low as they passed over a large rut in the road. As they pulled out of the depression, the carriage did not right itself. They dragged along for a few feet, leaning to one side, before coming to a grinding halt.

Theo and Lord Trevelyan hurried out into the rain to see what the problem was. A moment later, they opened the door and peered inside to where Charlotte and Georgiana were waiting anxiously.

“The axle is broken,” Theo told them.

“Oh no!” Charlotte exclaimed. “What are we going to do?”

“We’re less than a half mile out of Dunstable. We’ll walk to the posting inn there and send someone out to fix it,” Lord Trevelyan said.

Charlotte sighed. “We have the worst luck when it comes to carriage travel in bad weather. I’m starting to believe we’re cursed.” She and her husband shared a commiserating look.

“How long will it take?” Georgiana asked.

“Hard to say,” Theo said. “Hopefully it’ll only be a minor delay.” He met Georgiana’s worried eyes. “If it’s any longer

than a day, we'll hire a carriage," he told her.

She nodded, hating the delay. After they were married, everything would be all right. But until then, anything could happen.

Part of it was how well she knew her father. He usually didn't just walk away from a problem—he chewed on it with determination until it was solved. She just couldn't be certain that she and Theo had faced the last of his objections.

A part of her worried Papa would do something rash. Would he do something completely outrageous, like try to kidnap Georgiana? Do violence on Theo? That wasn't how he usually operated, but she couldn't be certain. Georgiana was his beloved daughter. And his hatred for the St. Clairs seemed to have no bounds.

They descended from the carriage, and although Georgiana was wearing her hooded cloak, Theo wrapped his coat around her. "It's slicked with oil," he told her, "and won't absorb wetness like that thin wool will."

The walk to the town was muddy but thankfully short. They took rooms at the inn, and after they'd all dried off and changed, they met back in the common room.

Theo and Lord Trevelyan had already received word on the status of the carriage. "At least two days before the damage can be repaired," Theo said. "Trev and I will see about hiring a carriage."

For propriety's sake, it was decided that Charlotte would travel with Georgiana and Theo tomorrow, leaving Trevelyan behind to oversee the repairs. He'd join them in London as soon as he could, probably after Theo and Georgiana were already married.

It would only be a delay of one day, so Georgiana couldn't explain the feeling of doom that was darkening her mood. They ate a meal of pea soup and pigeon pie, and she retired to her room afterward. After all, the sooner she went to bed, the sooner they'd be on their way again.

After she'd changed into her nightgown and was brushing

out her hair, there was a knock on her door. She expected Charlotte's maid, who had been so helpful to her, since they hadn't brought Anne—who was, after all, employed by her father. Instead, when she opened the door, Theo was standing on the threshold, still dressed in his tailcoat and trousers, but his cravat was hanging loose around his neck, making him look rakish and wicked. Her pulse leapt into her throat.

“May I come in?”

She looked furtively past him. “Does anyone know you're here?”

“Not a soul.”

She pulled him in, closed the door, and relocked it.

“Are you all right, Georgiana?” he asked, holding her at arm's length, his eyes searching hers.

“I am. I know Charlotte and Lord Trevelyan are only trying to help, but...”

He laughed softly. “I know. To hell with propriety. I just want to marry you.”

“Mmm. Me too.”

He backed her up against the wall, and she wrapped her arms around him. “This is hell,” he murmured between hot kisses. “I miss you. I want you.”

They kissed as she pushed his tailcoat off his shoulders. When he took it all the way off and tossed it aside, she went to work on the buttons of his brocade waistcoat, then tugged his linen shirt out of his trousers and pushed her hands up beneath the fabric. She couldn't get enough of the taut, warm skin of his chest. The dents and bulges of muscle and crisp hairs—so different from her own body. So masculine. So *arousing*.

He drew back a moment to yank his shirt over his head. When he stepped toward her again, his eyes flashed an icy, determined blue.

“Your turn.”

He tugged her night rail up, and she obligingly lifted her

arms as he pulled it up and off her body. She stood naked before him, and he gathered her close, her breasts pressing against the warm skin of his chest.

“Mmm.” She snuggled against him. “I’ve missed this.”

“It’s been two days.”

“Two days too long,” she said.

“I agree.”

She frowned at him. “But there’s a problem.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“You still have your trousers on.”

“That *is* a problem, isn’t it?” His voice was low. Seductive. “I think you need to take them off, Georgiana.”

She slid down the wall to her knees and worked on the buttons, then pushed the fabric down his narrow hips and over the curve of his taut buttocks. His cock jumped out, and she laughed softly, taking it into her hands. It was hard and scorching hot, and he groaned as she knelt forward to pepper kisses up the length of it. When she reached the top, she scored her teeth lightly over it—he’d told her how much he liked that—and he shuddered. Then, holding him between her palms, she guided him into her mouth, swirling her tongue around him and taking him deep until he touched the back of her throat.

He braced himself against the wall, head down, watching her. She looked up at him as she moved back up his shaft. His lips were parted, his eyes hooded as he watched her. She’d never seen anything more erotic in her life.

Cupping his ballocks with her palm, she closed her eyes and moved back down him again, glorying in how hard he was, how much he loved this. She did it again and again, and in a few moments he was panting. Three more times, with her fingertips tickling the back of his ballocks, and he grunted out, “Not yet,” then took her shoulders, pulling himself from the heat of her mouth. She kept her fingers wrapped around him, though. “What?” she said, her own voice so gruff it hardly felt

like her own. “What is it?”

“I’m going to come if you keep doing that.”

She blinked at him. Wasn’t that the point? “So?”

“I…” He shook his head and growled, “Not yet.” He lifted her until she was once again standing. “Come to bed with me.”

“Ah, I see,” she said in a self-satisfied tone. “The pleasure I’m bringing you is so great, you cannot hold your own weight for a second longer.”

He slanted her a glance. “You are a quick learner.”

“I pride myself in that.”

“In all things,” he agreed. “Lawn bowls, parlor games, lovemaking.”

She laughed. He knew her well.

He finished kicking off his trousers and left them on the floor as they went to the bed and tucked themselves under the blanket. Then, he moved over her, the weight of his cock heavy against her thigh.

His eyes were serious. “I want to make love to you. I want to be inside you.” He smoothed his thumb over her cheek, and she turned to kiss it.

They were to be married—if not tomorrow, then the day after. They could spend every night of their lives together just like this.

The thought brought her a measure of peace that she’d never known was possible. It was also incredibly arousing. The ache between her legs was so heavy, so deep, she knew there was only one thing that would satisfy it.

She touched his cheek and looked into his blue, blue eyes. They shone with love, but there was also a deep ache in them. He *ached*, just as she did.

“I want that, too. So much. But…you could get me with child,” she said quietly, because that was a concern that still weighed on her. “We haven’t discussed children.”

He nodded slowly, at the same time pushing his cock against her. “I don’t really care about an heir. I keep hoping that one day Sebastian will be responsible enough to take on the title. But...”

He seemed vulnerable all of a sudden, and she cupped his face in her hands. “But what, Theo?”

“Over the past few days, I’ve thought about having a child with you. A son or daughter with your quick wit and sly smile and blond hair and changeable eyes. And...I *want* that. I would love to have children with you, Georgiana.”

She shuddered—from terror or delight, she didn’t really know. Children were a natural progression of marriage, but—

“I...I don’t know.”

“That’s all right.” He kissed her tenderly. “I won’t come inside you until you decide. If we have intercourse, it’s still a risk, but it will be less of one.”

She pulled him close against her and spoke into his hair. “Then, yes. I want you inside me, Theo.”

He breathed out, kissing her neck, then her collarbone and lower to her breasts. “God, I love your breasts,” he said between kisses.

“I know.” She arched into his mouth as the sensations arrowed straight to her core. “I love that you love them.”

He moved back up her body, lips running over her jaw and then her mouth, shifting his weight onto one forearm as he took his cock in hand to slide over her.

He moved the head through her slickness again and again, stroking over that sensitive spot until she was gasping, her hands clenched into fists over his back. Then, he lodged himself at her opening. Pulling back slightly, he whispered, “Are you ready?”

She gazed at him. The handsome man who would be her husband stared at her through slitted eyes, his body tense above her. She loved him so much.

When she nodded, he pressed in. The pain was a heavy

thing, seeming to expand and stretch as he moved in deeper and deeper still. And then the ache turned sharp, and she gasped. He stilled, holding himself suspended above her, until the sensation ebbed a little, and then he thrust in to the hilt.

She groaned. But he was groaning at the same time. They lapsed into silence, and he held there a moment as if allowing her to adjust. She could only feel heat, wetness, and a strange fullness where it had felt so achingly empty only a moment before.

“Georgiana,” he whispered. His voice was so rough it sounded like it was on the cusp of breaking altogether. He dragged out until he was almost completely free from her body before thrusting in again. This time, the movement was smoother, faster, and she gasped. Pain sparked with pleasure. She wasn’t sure which was stronger.

He started a rhythm of strokes, pulling out and pushing back in, the friction between them quickly diminishing the pain until all she felt was that glide of his body and the fireworks of sensation making her dig her nails into his back, forcing him ever harder and deeper.

Soon, she was pushing back against his thrusts, gasping, “Yes, Theo, *yesss*,” and her body was tightening around him. He reached between them to pass his fingertips over the sensitive spot above where they were joined, and that was all it took.

She sailed over, her body going stiff and then releasing in glorious pulses that had her gasping and arching in pleasure. His strokes sped up, extending the pulses, but then he suddenly pulled out and took himself in hand, pumping vigorously. And as the last pulses of her orgasm dwindled, his release splashed in hot stripes over her stomach.

When it was over, he collapsed beside her, holding her to him and pressing his lips to her forehead.

“I love you,” was the last thing she heard before she slipped into sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Five

At some point, they roused themselves and cleaned up before making love again. They woke at dawn, and when Charlotte's maid knocked on Georgiana's door, Theo slipped past the mortified young woman with a bright, "Good morning!"

He couldn't help it. He was damned happy. At times throughout the day, he thought he might perhaps be the happiest man alive. But then, when they were in the hired carriage, he saw the faint crease between Georgiana's brows even as she gave him one of her beautiful smiles, and his worries returned with a vengeance.

It was going to be all right, he told himself. They'd marry, and he'd do his damndest to make her the happiest woman alive. But without her family...

Banishing that thought, he pulled Georgiana closer and pressed his lips to her temple, even as Charlotte raised a brow at him from the facing seat.

The rain had dulled into a sullen, cloudy mist, but the hired carriage was efficient and fast. They arrived in London that afternoon. Theo left Charlotte and Georgiana at Trevelyan's town house before heading to Doctors Commons to apply for the special license.

And it was there he encountered another problem: The Archbishop of Canterbury was "unavailable" to approve special licenses to marry.

"I am the Duke of Desborough," Theo said. "Is he in London? If so, he will make an exception."

"No exceptions, sir," the clerk said sourly.

It took some work, but the man finally revealed that the archbishop was ill with a fever. And no one—*no one*—was to bring him any undue stress or any form of work until he was out of his sickbed.

The best Theo could do was apply for a common license, which meant he and Georgiana could marry in seven days.

His mood dark, he called upon Charlotte and Georgiana to give them the news.

“Seven days,” Georgiana breathed. They shared a look of despair.

“Seven days isn’t that long,” Charlotte said, trying to reassure them. “In terms of a lifetime, it’s hardly any time at all.”

She barely left them alone to share a brief kiss before she was back and shooing him away.

“I’ll come see you,” he told Georgiana as he walked out. “Every day.”

He returned to his empty town house. Since the common license meant they would need to marry in their parish church, the first thing he did was write to the rector at St. George’s Hanover Square requesting that he move his other appointments early in the morning next Friday so he could marry the Duke of Desborough and Georgiana Milford.

That request was quickly accepted. He received a note an hour later saying it was done. Reverend Hodgson would marry them at nine o’clock in the morning of the twenty-seventh of August. Theo sent Georgiana a note to let her know.

Late that night, Theo was in his study, going over the non-urgent correspondence he’d received while he’d been in Derbyshire, when he heard the sounds of someone entering the house.

Sebastian was home.

Steeling himself, Theo left his study and met his younger brother halfway down the stairs.

“Theo!” Sebastian’s face crumpled into a frown. “What’re you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be...somewhere north?”

He was drunk, Theo realized. He sighed. “I returned early.”

“Why? Was your house party dull?”

“Not at all.” He took a breath. “I’m to be married next

week.”

Sebastian’s dark brows climbed his forehead. “Married?”

“I’m marrying Georgiana Milford.”

Sebastian’s legs went out from under him. He sat down—hard—right there on the step.

“Georgiana Milford?” he said quietly, his expression sobering. “As in the Milfords of Norton House?”

“Yes.”

“They hate us.”

Sighing, Theo sat on the step beside his brother. “Thomas and Eliza Milford hate us. But not their daughter. Not Georgiana.”

“Really?” Sebastian sounded unconvinced.

Theo thought of the love in Georgiana’s eyes when she looked at him, and his heart clenched. It had only been a few hours since he’d seen her, but God, he missed her. “Really.”

Sebastian studied him for a moment. “A love match, then?”

He started to shrug—a typical careless response that came easily—then he stopped himself. He wasn’t ashamed of the truth. He was proud. He nodded. “Yes. A love match.”

His brother clapped him on the back, then squeezed his shoulder. “Are they going to allow you to marry her?”

Theo laughed bitterly. “No. But I’m doing it regardless.”

“This might mean war with the Milfords, you know.”

“I know.” He paused. He wished it was different. He didn’t want to be at war with the Milfords, yet they had given him no choice. “But have we ever known anything different with those people?”

Sebastian stared straight ahead. “No, I suppose we haven’t.” His fingers tightened on Theo’s shoulder. “I’ll stand for you at your wedding, Theo. If you’ll have me.”

Theo closed his eyes, emotion surging through him. Perhaps the idea of having a true brotherly relationship with Sebastian

wasn't so farfetched. From now on, he was determined to be there for his brother. Maybe one day Sebastian would be able to forgive Theo's abandonment of him. Maybe one day Theo would be able to forgive himself.

Taking his silence for hesitance, Sebastian added, "That is... if you don't have someone else. Someone better, I mean—"

"No." He smiled at his brother. "I'd be honored if you stood beside me as my best man."

...

The seven days passed slowly for Georgiana, highlighted by Theo's afternoon visits and their stolen kisses. When he was gone, though, thoughts about how her life had been upended crept in, no matter how hard she tried to shove them away.

She hadn't heard from her parents. That wasn't a surprise, but she couldn't stop the devastation that surged through her whenever she thought about them. Their broken relationship haunted her nights, making her toss and turn through the darkest hours.

No parents. No business—another devastating blow. In the heat of the moment, she'd agreed to dive into a new life with a man she hardly knew. A duke, no less. She couldn't comprehend what would be required of her once she took on the mantle of a duchess.

All she really knew was that she loved Theo. That was enough. Now that she had time to think it over, she knew she'd still make the same decision. There was no denying the rightness of them together; how thoughts of him gave her a warm feeling in her chest, settled her, and pushed away her worries. Theo was the person she was meant to be with.

But how would she spend her day-to-day life? Would the task of "being a duchess" interfere with her pursuits in fashion? Even if she did still have the time to work, how would she redefine her vocation without her father's backing? Would she still be able to study trends, create design ideas, and watch her detailed sketches and plans come to fruition?

At least Theo would be there to help her navigate this new existence. Still, her life after nine o'clock on Friday loomed like a dark chasm of the unknown.

To take her mind off her worries, she used some of her skills to design the perfect dress to wear to her wedding. She'd put her favorite seamstress, Madame Bouvier, and her assistants to work furiously sewing. The dress would be a sensation. It was wild and unconventional, and it was beautiful. Too bad her parents would never see it.

Lord Trevelyan returned on the fifth day—the axle had been more of a challenge to fix than expected. But Charlotte was ecstatic to have him home, and Georgiana was glad both her and Theo's dearest friends would stand as witnesses to their wedding.

On Wednesday, she had her final fitting. She turned, the skirt flaring, and Madame Bouvier, her assistants, and Charlotte all gasped in wonderment. "I've never seen anything like it," Charlotte breathed.

"You are a princess, mademoiselle," Madame Bouvier declared. "Soon to be a queen."

Georgiana turned to stare into the mirror. The dress was beautiful, as she'd known it would be. But she looked small in it. Haunted, with dark smudges beneath her wide eyes.

This was ridiculous. She was strong, stronger with Theo beside her. She straightened her spine and stared down that weak girl in the mirror. She was Georgiana Milford. She had never been afraid of anything. Tomorrow, she'd walk boldly into the unknown and marry the man she loved.

And then, they'd live happily ever after.

...

Theo was out of bed before dawn on the morning of his wedding. The house was already bright, the servants abuzz as they prepared for the arrival of their new mistress.

Georgiana was going to be his wife.

Nerves ran through him as he prowled the house until it was time for him to get dressed. At seven, he bathed, and then his valet shaved him. He dressed in black and white with formal breeches, his tailcoat a perfect, fashionable cut, his cravat stiffly starched and tied with expert precision. He put a little pomade in his hair and styled it so it was sure to stay out of his face. He didn't want to obscure his vision of the only thing he wanted to be looking at this morning. His beautiful Georgiana. He'd seen her only yesterday, but every bit of him wanted her in his arms to stay.

He would bring her home, take her to their bed, and remain there for a week. Perhaps longer.

Sebastian had come home earlier than usual last night, and sober, which was an improvement. He came into Theo's room after breakfast, looking dapper. He was an inch taller than Theo and broader across the shoulders. Even as well-dressed as he was, he looked more like a boxer than the heir to a duke.

Sebastian's eyes met Theo's in the looking glass. "Are you ready?"

Theo smiled. "I've never been more ready for anything in my life."

...

An hour later, standing beside his brother at the front of the church, he watched his bride walk down the aisle, her hand on Trevelyan's arm. Sitting at the front pew, Charlotte was beaming. Even Trevelyan had a small smile on his face.

Georgiana, though... Once his gaze locked on her, Theo couldn't look anywhere else. She was wearing a gown the likes of which he'd never seen before. It was made of white silk and lace with very short sleeves revealing the pale, smooth skin of her upper arms. Her hair was swept up in the back, but curling golden strands tumbled down over her shoulders. Unlike the high-waisted, straight-skirted dresses that were so fashionable right now, her dress clung to her curves, hugging her breasts, the slightly dipping neckline revealing a hint of creamy cleavage. The silk cinched her waist and flared over

her hips before falling to the floor in a sleek line.

She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. She was radiant. Perfect. A goddess.

She stared at him. She wasn't smiling. Instead, she studied him with an intensity that seared through him. When she was close, he reached out to her, and Trevelyan placed her hand on his. She stepped to his side, and they shared one final look, a communication of their commitment that required no words.

Shoulder to shoulder, hands squeezed together, they turned to Hodgson. With a clearing of his throat, he began the service.

Theo heard the prayers, the readings, et cetera. Well, he heard them, and he stood and knelt at the appropriate times, but he didn't *digest* them. His heart was beating hard, and his cheeks were hot. It felt like all there was to hold him secured to the earth was Georgiana's hand, clenched tightly in his own.

"Therefore," Reverend Hodgson said, "if any man can show any just cause why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace."

Theo held his breath, not daring to look back into the church, as Hodgson paused.

Silence.

Theo let out a long exhalation as Hodgson continued, commanding them both to confess if there was any impediment to their marriage.

Neither of them spoke.

Then, the rector turned to Theo and asked if he'd take Georgiana to be his wife, to have and to hold, forsaking all others, for as long as they lived.

"I will," Theo said, loud, clear, and confident.

The rector turned to Georgiana. "Miss Georgiana Milford, wilt thou have this man to be thy wedded husband—"

"No!" came a roar from the back of the church. "She will not!"

As one, Theo and Georgiana spun around. Thomas Milford

was storming down the aisle, his wife and a young woman who bore a close resemblance to Georgiana at his heels.

Chapter Twenty-Six

So they had come.

Georgiana straightened her spine. It was too late for their interference. A part of her wanted to throw her arms around her sister, whom she'd missed so much. But the horrified expression on Lizzie's face confused her. Was she on their parents' side in this? Or did the horror stem from how appalled she was that their parents were making such a scene?

Her father reeled to a stop before them as Reverend Hodgson demanded, "What is the meaning of this, sir?"

"I've come to stop this nonsense," her father announced.

Georgiana shook her head. "Papa, it is too—"

"No." He turned back and took Lizzie's hand, tugging her forward. She moved to stand beside him and looked at Georgiana, her eyes filling with tears.

"Don't do this, Gigi," she whispered.

So she *had* taken their parents' side. "Lizzie, you don't understand."

"But I do!" Lizzie exclaimed. "I understand exactly!"

How could she? That made no sense whatsoever. "What do you mean?"

"I, too, was taken in by them."

A sound came from Theo's direction. Was it a growl? Georgiana glanced at him. He couldn't have been the one who'd made the noise. It must have come from his brother, who stood behind him. But her gaze didn't stray from Theo's cool expression—he'd slipped on his mask. But his lips had also thinned slightly, hinting that he wasn't completely unmoved by her family's appearance.

She turned back to her sister. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"The goal of the St. Clairs," her father announced, "has been

to ruin us. From the beginning.”

Georgiana stiffened. This had nothing to do with Theo—this was an old grudge her father refused to let go. And now he’d come here, interrupted the day that was supposed to be the best day of her life—

“It’s true, Gigi.” A tear dripped down Lizzie’s cheek.

Her father nodded tightly. “Tell her, Liz.”

Lizzie took a shuddering breath, glanced around furtively, then clasped her arms across her chest, clutching at her elbows. “A-almost nine years ago,” she began in a quavering voice, “the Duke of Desborough attempted to force me into marriage with his son.”

Georgiana stopped breathing.

Lizzie dropped her gaze to the floor, her chest heaving as if she’d just pushed out words that had drained all the strength from her body.

“That is untrue,” Theo said evenly.

Georgiana’s mother gasped. “How dare you accuse my daughter of lying!”

“It is not a lie.” Lizzie looked up at Theo, her cheeks streaked with tears. “Ask him.” She gestured toward Theo’s brother.

Everyone turned to Lord Sebastian, who took an aggressive step forward. “It was—”

Theo raised a hand to his brother’s chest, stopping him mid-sentence. Jaw working, Sebastian stilled. He stared at the Milfords with blue eyes not unlike his brother’s, but where Theo’s eyes were cold, Lord Sebastian’s burned with an emotion Georgiana could not name.

Shrinking away from the brothers, Lizzie grabbed Georgiana’s hand to tug her close and spoke quickly. Her voice in Georgiana’s ear was so quiet, Georgiana almost couldn’t hear. “The duke ordered Lord Sebastian to seduce me in a place where we’d be caught in a compromising position.” She squeezed Georgiana’s fingers tightly as if to fortify

herself. “He pretended to love me, but he never did. And I—” Her voice broke. “I was naive. I thought... I believed he loved me.”

“Lizzie...” Georgiana pulled back, and her heart clenched when she saw the pain twisting across her sister’s face. And suddenly, something she’d never understood became crystal clear. “Oh no,” she breathed. “Was this why you left?”

Lizzie swallowed hard. She stared into Georgiana’s eyes and spoke as if they were the only two people in the room. “When Papa found out, he sent me away rather than force me to marry the blackguard who’d lied to me. That’s why I’ve been unable to return to England these past nine years. To keep me safe from the St. Clairs.”

Georgiana was stunned. “*Why* did you never tell me?”

“You were younger,” Papa cut in. Startled, they looked up at him. “And an innocent. You knowing the salacious circumstances would have benefited no one.”

“And now... Now, everyone will know,” Mama whimpered, looking wildly around.

“But that is all right.” Lizzie’s eyes locked with Georgiana’s. “I don’t care about that. My reputation has long since ceased to matter. All I care about is you understanding the truth about them.”

“But...Theo couldn’t have—” Georgiana broke off. Surely Theo hadn’t been part of this. She turned to him. “Did you know?”

Theo opened his mouth, but before he could answer, her father thundered, “Of course he knew! I have letters in my possession detailing the duke’s plans to ruin me! The man plotted first to steal Lizzie away by coaching the younger brother on how to seduce her. After that, he intended to have his heir force *you* into marriage, Georgiana. Then, via the two of you, he aimed to take my land. You need only to read them, and you will know the extent of his villainy.”

Mama took Lizzie’s hand and pressed it to her heart. “What Lord Sebastian did to your sister...” She swallowed hard, wet

pain welling in her eyes. “It was... It was *incomprehensible*.”

The matching expressions on Lizzie’s and Mama’s faces made Georgiana blink against her own welling tears. God. What had happened? But still... “Theo had nothing to do with it.”

“And yet, look at him.” Papa gestured roughly in Theo’s direction. Georgiana looked. Theo stood very still, his posture stiff, his expression unflinching under all these accusations. “This duke’s actions prove that he is just like his father. Engaging in frivolous parties in the country rather than focusing on pressing tasks essential to the estate. Escaping to London to avoid tragedy in his community—tragedy that his brother most likely carried out with his blessing. Worst of all, he’s executing his father’s nefarious plot to ruin me.”

“How?” Georgiana demanded.

“By seducing my daughter out from under my very nose!” Papa shot back. “Ripping her from her happy life, from all she has ever known, from the loving arms of her family. Are *those* the acts of an honorable man?”

Georgiana gaped at him.

“No! They are not,” her father continued. “Because he is a St. Clair, and they are *all the same*.”

Georgiana glanced at Theo yet again. This was his time to refute all these accusations. To tell them he denounced every evil thing his father had said and done. To proclaim his innocence in the villagers’ deaths. To announce his plans for Clairwood Park and for the surrounding community. To share his love for her with the world.

She gazed up at the man she loved. Waiting.

...

Even as he kept his expression carefully blank, Theo’s mind roiled. Milford’s revelation about Elizabeth and Sebastian made his stomach churn, but he wasn’t surprised by it. How like his father to use Sebastian in such a perverse way.

In the end, though, Milford was right. Theo *was* guilty. He might not have known what Sebastian had done to Georgiana's sister, but if he'd been there for his brother, if he'd protected and cared for him like an older brother should, it never would have happened.

Even now, Theo had been avoiding his duty while the estate struggled and his brother was blamed for two villagers' deaths.

Worst of all, he *had* taken Georgiana from everything she loved. Willfully and knowingly, he had dragged her into a life full of challenges he never seemed to be able to live up to. How could he bring her home to Clairwood Park? How could he force her to live in the home with rooms named Busty Betsy's Boudoir and Fancy Franny's Fuck-Nest?

She was too good for that. She was too good for *him*.

So, yes. Milford was right. He could not stand there and insist upon his innocence.

The interior of the church had lapsed into silence as Georgiana looked at him with a sort of expectant hope. How had this beautiful, incredible woman come to believe in him when Theo knew better than to believe in himself?

God, he loved her so damn much. But he didn't deserve her. He ran away whenever things became too difficult to face, and people had suffered because of it. He'd left his mother to a misery that had ultimately killed her. He'd abandoned Sebastian alone to face their father's manipulations and abuse.

And now he'd done it again. Instead of facing Milford head-on, he'd taken Georgiana and run. And at that moment, with her looking at him like this, begging him with her eyes, Theo realized something that gutted him. If he severed Georgiana from her loving family, he'd end up destroying her, too.

He gazed at her beautiful face. He wanted so desperately to marry her, to make her his, but more than that, he wanted to deserve her.

She deserved a different man. A better one.

God knew, he didn't ever want to hurt her. But a small hurt would be better than the lifetime of hurt she'd suffer if she

were to marry him.

He wanted to drag her into his arms, reassure her, tell her he loved her more than his next breath. Instead, he gazed at her as the familiar ice thickened into a solid sheet over his heart.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the reverend finally said, breaking the silence, “this is the house of God, and this discussion has already gone too far. I have other weddings to attend to.”

“Don’t do this, Gigi,” her sister pleaded, clutching Georgiana’s arm in desperation. “I beg you. Please, don’t do it.”

“Come with us,” her father said, reaching out to her. “Come home with us.”

Georgiana’s eyes seared into him. He knew she wanted him to tell everyone assembled here how much he loved her. She wanted him to show that he would move heaven and earth for their love.

He couldn’t do that. He didn’t have the right to do it.

He allowed the ice to freeze over the love that wanted to seep from his skin, pour out of his eyes, drag him to his knees. He forced himself to be aloof for the last time. “Do what you want, Miss Milford. I don’t—”

He was going to say, “I don’t care,” but his throat closed on the last word. He couldn’t say it. Because he had never cared about anything more in his life.

She caught his slip and stepped a tiny bit closer to him. “You don’t...?” she encouraged. “Do you mean... Are you trying to say that you didn’t know about your family’s nefarious intentions toward my sister?”

He gave a slight shake of his head. No, that wasn’t what he was trying to say.

“You knew, then?” she whispered. “You knew and didn’t tell me?”

He raised his chin. He was his father’s son after all. As much as he’d tried to clean away that name, it was who he was. And he would never force anyone—much less someone he loved

like he loved Georgiana—to marry the Duke of Despots.

He managed a shrug, and somewhere deep inside his chest, his heart broke all over again at the devastation that crumpled her face.

When she finally turned back to her family, he turned to them, too. There it was, in her father's shining eyes. And in her sister's and mother's. *Love.*

She made a tiny noise—a small, choking sob. Theo clamped his mouth shut as she took her father's hand and let him lead her from the church.

...

Theo sat in stony silence beside Sebastian on the carriage ride back to his house, feeling like his entire body—even his shattered heart—was encased in ice and the chill had permeated through his being so deeply, he couldn't feel a thing.

When they arrived, he turned to his brother. “My study,” he told Sebastian. “Now.”

Sebastian nodded. Theo pushed past the servants, hardly noticing how their smiles faltered, leaving his brother to explain that there had been no wedding after all. Sebastian followed him upstairs into the study, where Theo closed the door against everyone, then spun around and faced his brother, who stood in the center of the room, head bowed.

“Explain,” he bit out.

Sebastian sighed and shoved a hand through his hair. Then he went to the sidebar and poured a brandy before holding it out to Theo in offering. Theo shook his head. He couldn't stomach a drink right now.

Sebastian took a fortifying gulp of his drink. “There's not much to explain.”

“Do it anyway.”

Sebastian sighed. “It was as they said. Our father encouraged me to court Elizabeth—secretly, of course, since Milford

would never allow an official courtship between us. So I did.”

“Why?” Theo demanded. “Why would you do anything that bastard asked of you?”

Sebastian glared at him. “Were you there? How can you ask me that? I was eighteen years old and given an order. And...”

“And what?”

“Elizabeth was...” He trailed off again and took another deep swallow of the brandy. “She was...opposite to everything my life represented. She was happiness, light, innocence. She was *beauty*. I liked her. I *wanted* her.”

Sebastian turned away, but not before Theo saw the glister in his eyes. He gave his brother a minute to compose himself, then bit out, “Go on.”

Sebastian turned back to him, gripping his refilled brandy glass so hard, his knuckles were white. “The courtship continued for a few months. Then, Father arranged for us to get caught in the village. But it all went to hell when Milford refused to allow his precious daughter to be wed to a St. Clair. Instead, he sent her away.”

“Why didn’t I hear anything about this?”

“Why would you? I think you were on the Continent at the time.”

“Why didn’t I hear about it afterward?”

“Again, why would I tell you?”

“Because it’s important!” Theo roared.

“It was the deepest regret, the deepest shame of my life,” Sebastian shot back, then gritted his teeth. “And you are the prodigal son.”

“I was *never* the prodigal son.” Theo sank into a chair, his mind spinning. Something inside him was thawing. And it was a twisting, screaming monster, beating at his guts, sharp wings slicing through him, taking his breath. *You’ve lost her. You’ve lost her.*

As if from a great distance, he heard his brother asking,

“What are you going to do?”

Theo tried to draw in a breath and failed. The monster had grabbed his lungs and was squeezing tight.

“You have to do something,” Sebastian insisted. “Fight for her. Go to Milford and... I don’t know. Get her back somehow. Challenge him to a duel. *Do something.*”

Theo leaned forward, shoulders heaving, his head in his hands.

There was nothing to be done.

...

Georgiana wasn’t a crier, but since she’d agreed to marry the Duke of Desborough, she’d wept twice. The first time for the loss of her family. Now for the loss of him.

Could he really have known about the scheme to destroy her father? No. *No*, of course he couldn’t. If he had, he would have told her. Wouldn’t he?

Georgiana wiped her eyes and gazed at her sister, who was tucked beside her on the palm leaf–embroidered silk sofa in their mother’s sitting room. “Why did you never tell me?” she whispered. “We told each other everything.”

Lizzie looked down. “A part of me wanted to. But I was so ashamed. And Papa said I shouldn’t tell you. That you were better off not knowing.”

Georgiana sighed. “That’s not true.”

“I know that now. If you’d known, you never would have allowed yourself to be seduced by him.”

Georgiana frowned at that. She wasn’t sure that was true. She didn’t think anything could have prevented her from being seduced by the Duke of Desborough.

If she kept thinking about that, she’d start crying again. She took a deep breath. “Will you tell me now?”

Lizzie looked toward the hearth, but her gaze was unfocused in memory. Georgiana and her sister were similar in

appearance, both blond, hazel-eyed, and petite, but Lizzie's edges were softer. She was a gentler soul. A tenderhearted lamb whereas Georgiana had always been more of a lion.

"I always thought he was handsome," Lizzie said quietly.

"Well, he *is* handsome."

Lizzie sighed. "I know. Even seeing him in the church... I couldn't look at him. Gazing upon him made me feel so nervous and out of sorts, and then when he looked back at me..." She shook her head and swallowed. "Anyhow, I thought he was handsome, and do you remember how he was kind to us, despite how rude Papa and Mama were to him?"

"I do remember."

"He started joining me on my morning rides."

Georgiana's jaw dropped. "He came onto our land?"

Lizzie looked down at her hands twisting in her lap. "Not exactly. I went onto the St. Clair lands, and he discovered me there one morning."

Georgiana tilted her head. "You were only allowed to ride alone if you didn't cross our borders. Did you do it purposely?"

"I did," she admitted. "I knew he liked to ride. I thought there might be a small chance I'd encounter him."

Georgiana's mouth dropped open. She was learning something new about her sweet, humble sister.

"We rode together for many mornings, and we became friends. At least, I thought that was what we were. But then..."

"Then?" Georgiana breathed.

"Then he kissed me. And I knew—" She broke off, then corrected herself. "I *thought* I was in love."

"How much time had passed by then?"

"A few months. It was that summer before I left. And then at the harvest festival in September, we went outside and... Well, that was when Papa discovered us."

Georgiana flinched. “That must have been awful for you.”

“We’d been talking about marrying. We were very young, but Sebastian said...” She swallowed and looked down at her lap. “He said he loved me and wanted to marry me. So...yes, it was awful in that it was embarrassing to be caught like that, but I assumed it would hasten our wedding. I underestimated Papa’s fury.” She pulled in a shaky breath. “But the worst was when that fury was validated by all those letters.”

“How did he come to have access to the duke’s actual correspondence?” Georgiana couldn’t help but think that perhaps Papa was wrong about the whole thing. It sounded to her like Lord Sebastian might have actually loved her sister.

“It was the old duke’s steward, Mr. Anderson.”

“Oh,” Georgiana murmured. The man had been employed by the previous duke until a few years ago when he’d come to work for the Milfords.

Lizzie nodded. “You might not know this, but Mr. Anderson was a spy of sorts in the duke’s household before he came to work for us. He would transcribe the duke’s most nefarious correspondence and then pass the copies to Papa.”

Georgiana rubbed the bridge of her nose between her fingers. “I had no idea.”

“Papa always wanted to protect you from the harshest truths. He tried to protect me, as well, until—” Lizzie swallowed hard. “Well, until he caught me with Sebastian. It was then that he first sought out Mr. Anderson. Mr. Anderson told him right away that the duke had been pressuring Sebastian to hurry it up, to get me fully under his thumb before the harvest festival so that the discovery of our affair would go off without a hitch.” Lizzie looked away. Her voice was a little huskier when she spoke again. “In the subsequent years, Mr. Anderson was able to reveal the entirety of the old duke’s plots against Papa.”

Georgiana put a hand on her sister’s arm and squeezed. “I’m so sorry, Lizzie. It was so unfair of you to be caught in the middle of such a horrible feud and for it to not only have

broken your heart so brutally, but to have driven you out of your home, out of your *country*.”

Lizzie pulled in another shaky breath. “No, no. It was long ago. I am fine, and I am happy in Nova Scotia. But now *you* are the one who has been hurt by a St. Clair. Will it ever end? Will they ever stop tormenting us?”

Georgiana frowned. *Had* Theo hurt her? He had nearly done exactly what his horrible father had wanted—stolen her away from her family and made her a St. Clair.

The thing was, even knowing that, she hadn’t fallen out of love with him. Not even close. That wasn’t what had made her turn away from him at the wedding, either.

She thought about the cold look on Theo’s face at the church and shuddered. She knew he retreated from his emotions, covered them with a frigid mask. She’d seen it before and confronted him about it.

But *why* hadn’t he taken off that mask for once, at probably the most important moment in both their lives, and showed the world that he loved her? He hadn’t even *looked* at her.

If he’d only reassured her of his love. If he’d offered firm comfort and support. But that hadn’t happened. She’d felt like she’d been thrown into a sea of confusion and doubt, and there had been nothing left to do but swim to a familiar shore.

Yet she still loved the stubborn fool.

She dashed an errant tear from her cheek, rose from the sofa, and smoothed down her skirts before straightening her shoulders. “I need to speak with Papa. I want to see his proof.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Sebastian piped up toward the end of their gloomy, conversation-free dinner that night. “I’m beginning to understand you, brother.”

Theo narrowed his eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“When something upsets you, you retreat into yourself. You become cold, distant, and unapproachable.” Sebastian took a bite of custard. “You are the opposite of me. When I am angry about something, I drink. I fight.”

“Then you have been angry for years,” Theo said tiredly.

Sebastian nodded easily. “Yes. About nine of them.”

Theo stared at his brother. Could Sebastian’s relationship with Elizabeth Milford have affected his life to that extent?

Given how he was feeling about his own relationship with Georgiana right now, he could easily understand that it had.

Sebastian pointed his fork at Theo. “But that’s a mistake, man.”

“What is?”

“Retreating into yourself as you did at the church. Miss Milford was looking at you as if she wanted you to say something in your defense, perhaps even defend your love match. But you didn’t. You just stood there as if you wanted to be anywhere else in the world but there.”

Theo stared down at his untouched dessert, unable to speak.

Sebastian’s voice softened. “I’ve always thought you didn’t give a damn about anything, including me. You always seem so uncaring and unreachable. Just like our father.”

His brother might as well have just twisted the knife in his chest.

Theo had done it because that was what was expected of him. To protect himself from displaying all those ugly emotions men were expected to conceal. To prevent himself

from feeling them at all. *Be like a stone, impervious to pain. Pretend nothing affects you.*

But to be told he was just like the old duke?

His fork fell to the table with a clatter. There was no way he could eat.

“I think you do care, though,” Sebastian continued, watching him closely. “Quite a bit. Don’t you?”

After a moment, Theo forced himself to nod tightly. “Of course I do.”

“You see! Even that much was difficult for you.”

Sebastian was right, but it hadn’t been like that with Georgiana. He’d opened himself to her, bared his heart.

She was the only person in the world he’d ever been able to show his true self to.

She was everything to him. *Everything*. How could he let that go?

He couldn’t.

Energy tingled over his body at that realization. He rose abruptly. Sebastian gave him a questioning look.

Theo couldn’t have Georgiana. Not as things stood. He needed to be a better man for her. He had to prove to her that he *was* a better man. He had to prove it to her family, as well, and to *everyone* within his sphere.

He was wasting time, sitting here in London. He had work to do—mountains of work. He needed to start. Right this second.

“I’m going to Clairwood Park,” he announced.

Sebastian frowned. “Why?”

“I need to win the trust of the staff, the tenants, and the village. And the Milfords.”

“What?” Sebastian choked. “That’s imposs—”

“No,” Theo said. “It isn’t.” Starting today, he was going to demonstrate to Georgiana Milford, and the rest of the world, that he cared. That he could be the duke they needed.

That he could be the man who deserved her.

...

Georgiana's father had piles of "proof," all of it in the form of letters and documents Mr. Anderson had copied and kept. It took her most of the evening to go through it all.

It made her hate the old duke nearly as much as her father did.

As for Sebastian... When she thought of him, a heavy mass of sadness settled in her chest. In the letters, she saw the evidence of how the old duke had browbeaten his younger son into submission. How he'd made Sebastian's life a living hell.

But Theo? Aside from the duke speculating to his steward on what a coup it would be if he could compel Theophilus to marry Georgiana Milford, there was nothing else.

She needed to see him. To explain the riot of emotions she'd felt in the church.

Learning of how his family had betrayed hers, how Sebastian had ruined her sister, how Theo might have been involved... She'd needed time to think, to understand it all, to talk to him and hear his side of the story. But he had remained silent.

If Theo had defended himself, she would have stayed.

She needed to talk to him. Not at her house—her father would never allow him in. Not at his house, either. A public place. Neutral ground.

She withdrew pen and paper and wrote to him.

Theo,

I will be at Hyde Park Corner at noon.

Georgiana

It seemed like the right place—the place where it had all started. She'd have a footman deliver it first thing in the morning.

She wasn't sure he'd come. Perhaps he was furious with her for walking out of their wedding. She knew if she'd been in

his position, she would have been hurt, confused, and embarrassed. But then she thought of his cool expression and careless shrug, and her own confusion and hurt rose to the forefront. Maybe he'd shrouded his emotions in a block of ice so thick it would never melt. Maybe he simply didn't care enough to come.

...

He didn't come.

The following day, Georgiana waited at Hyde Park Corner until one o'clock, but Theo never showed.

She was devastated.

Needing a friend's shoulder, she went to Charlotte and, ensconced in the countess's comfortable drawing room, told her what had happened.

Charlotte laid a hand on her arm. "He's already left town, Georgiana. He's gone to Clairwood Park."

"*Why?*" Georgiana asked. Why now, when nothing had been resolved between them?

Charlotte excused herself from the room, returning moments later bearing a note. "He asked me to give this to you. Maybe it will explain."

Georgiana opened it.

Dear Georgiana,

I rushed you into a decision that you weren't ready to make. That neither of us was ready for. And in the church, I realized the cost was far too high for you.

I did not know anything about my father manipulating Sebastian and your sister. However, that is no excuse. In the end, it is my fault. If I had not turned my back on my family and my home, it never would have happened.

I am sorry. For so long, I didn't know how to do it better. How to be better.

But I think I might know now.

I am heading to Clairwood Park. There, I am going to pour everything I have into proving my honorable intentions for my home, my tenants, my neighbors, my village, and for you.

If I succeed, perhaps I might win you back someday.

I tell myself, and I hope that you will hear this, too: If it takes weeks, months, even years, I will never give up. As Charlotte might say, "In terms of a lifetime, it's hardly any time at all."

Until then, I love you.

Yours always,

Theo

As she read, a gamut of emotions coursed through her. Frustration that he'd felt he'd rushed her. That wasn't true—she had been ready to commit herself to him completely. Then there was relief upon learning he really hadn't known about his father's plans for Sebastian and Lizzie. Then she blinked against the welling sadness when he claimed not to be good enough for her.

Finally, pride suffused her. He wanted her back, but he wanted to win her by showing the world the man he truly was—the man she knew he always had been. He would never give up.

And she would never give up on *him*.

Charlotte was frowning at her, her brows drawn together as she waited for Georgiana to process what she'd just read. Clearly, her friend had no idea what Theo had written.

"He says he wants to gain the trust of everyone in the area surrounding Clairwood Park," she told Charlotte in a quiet voice. "Including my family. And me."

"I see," Charlotte said. "And what do you think of that plan?"

Georgiana gazed down at the letter in her hands, her vision growing blurry behind the fat drops of tears forming in her eyes.

In terms of a lifetime, it's hardly any time at all.

He was asking her to be patient.

She stroked her thumb over the edge of his writing. “Theo understands what’s important to me. My family. My home. My work. Him. He wants me to have it all. He’s saying he’s going to work to make sure I get it.”

Blinking the tears away, she looked back to Charlotte. “And I’m going to let him.”

...

Georgiana went back to work with her father the following day with a small seed of hope growing inside her.

What if she *could* have it all?

Her contributions to her father’s business. Her family’s love. Theo’s love.

She couldn’t have that today. Running off with Theo now would ruin her relationship with her parents and Lizzie once and for all.

She loved Theo. She wasn’t going to change her mind about that. And he loved her—she was sure of it. If he was going to Clairwood Park to accomplish what he’d once thought impossible in an attempt to win her back, he *must* love her.

She was going to help him. She was going to work as hard as he was to change everyone’s mind about him.

Papa had forgiven her already, but part of that was only because he thought she agreed with him about Theo’s intentions. Lizzie had forgiven her immediately, of course. Poor Mama, though, was distraught after Georgiana had very publicly walked out of her wedding. According to her mother, Georgiana was now unmarriageable, and the dastardly duke had ruined her chances of ever living happily ever after with a loving husband. Mama couldn’t stop bemoaning her younger daughter’s fate and how it mirrored the fate of her older daughter.

On a blustery day in the first week of September, Georgiana and Lizzie spent the morning comforting their mother—*again*

—in her sitting room. “Perhaps we should leave town early,” Georgiana suggested, glancing toward the window, where swirling leaves foretold a brisk autumn.

“But your father needs to be here for another few weeks, at least.” Her mother dabbed at her damp eyes with her handkerchief. She looked between Lizzie and Georgiana and sniffed. “Both my beautiful, innocent daughters,” she whispered, her lower lip wobbling. “Ruined by St. Clairs.”

She blinked, and twin tears tracked down her cheeks. Lizzie and Georgiana exchanged a glance.

“You’re so unhappy here, Mama,” Lizzie said soothingly. “The country air will be good for you.”

“It will be good for us all,” Georgiana agreed.

Two days later, the three of them were tucked into a carriage and heading north.

...

Theo wrote to Georgiana every day. He sent the letters to Charlotte to forward them, as he suspected Georgiana’s father wouldn’t allow any letters sent by the Duke of Despots into his home.

In the letters, Theo went into detail about what he was doing, hoping he wasn’t boring her to tears.

Dear Georgiana,

Today we tore down the new barn. In the end, you were right—it was too close to the Milford property. I am moving it twenty feet from the property line and north a few dozen feet. Now, trees will block the view of it from the Norton House attic.

I’ve pulled in another dozen workers from London & environs—they arrived this morning. I have hired a foreman to oversee our various projects in Bromford, while my brother has agreed to oversee much-needed construction and renovation for all the tenants.

Mrs. Battle’s grandson, John, has a talent for book learning,

so I've written to Westminster School in London on his behalf, and this morning I received word that they will be taking him on as a student in the next term.

Also, I have sent inquiries to Italy for my latest idea—there is an engineer there I have heard about and wish to hire to create an aqueduct that will go through my property and into the village. Water has been difficult for many residents to obtain, especially during the most bitter months of winter, and I hope this project will give people better access to the abundant supply the river provides.

The new vicar for St. John's arrived this afternoon—I will call upon him tomorrow, but we have previously had an extensive correspondence. He will be a formidable addition to the neighborhood. His wife taught at a female seminary in London, and husband and wife have plans to start a comprehensive school for children in the village and surrounding farms.

His letters went on and on. No longer did he succumb to being dragged down by the impossibility of improving Clairwood Park and the surrounding area. His every day, every minute, was filled with turning the land that had once struck him as sour and cursed into something sweet and fertile.

And it was happening before his eyes. Day by day, he saw more smiles on the people's faces. He'd started at the very root of the land and had thrown out everything in his house that reminded him of his father. He'd stripped the place down and then replaced everything old and dark and heavy with modern furniture, light curtains, fresh flowers, and bright colors.

The day Theo rode out to see the fields green with healthy new growth, his chest contracted so tight, he could hardly choke out a thank-you to the men who had worked so hard to create such a thriving crop from the fallow field.

At night, he would go into the village to buy the men, tired from their labors on his lands and in the village, drinks in the pub. Other nights, he held dinners in his house, inviting the new vicar and other families in the area. Soon, not warned away by Milford, who'd gone unaccountably quiet, they all

started inviting him to their houses, as well.

Georgiana had returned to Norton House in early September. So painfully close and yet a world away. He still sent letters through Charlotte, but he hadn't heard back from her.

He didn't know why she hadn't written to him, but he wouldn't give up hope. Not yet. Not until he'd done everything he could to prove himself.

And then, one day in early autumn, he received a letter.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

To change a man's mind was no small task. Especially the mind of Georgiana's father, who, once he'd made a decision about something, was steely in his resolve. This trait had served him well in his years of business dealings, and now, it surrounded him like a stubborn, thick armor.

That's why it took Georgiana several weeks to find the smallest crack in it.

As they had every year, the Milford family had been invited to the harvest festival in the village in late September—a day of feasting and celebration culminating in a dance at the assembly rooms that evening.

All day, the village was abuzz with the news that an engineer had arrived from Italy to devise a solution to the dilemma of potable water access. By the time the neighborhood families gathered for the dance, the talk hadn't died down in the least.

Georgiana stood between her father and Mrs. Harrington, the new vicar's wife. Georgiana had immediately taken a liking to the lady, a brightly intelligent and optimistic woman who saw potential genius in everyone she encountered.

The Harringtons had never mentioned her scandalous almost-marriage to the Duke of Desborough, though they, like everyone else in England, had surely heard the gossip. Georgiana appreciated them for their discretion.

The duke wouldn't be here tonight. It was the first year he had been invited in the past nine years. However, news had spread that he was busy in London and couldn't attend. A part of Georgiana had hoped to see him tonight, but she knew it was probably for the best he hadn't come. Her father would have made a fuss and forced her, Lizzie, and Mama, who was finally beginning to recover from her trauma, to leave. Georgiana didn't want or need that kind of attention.

“No one can stop talking about the duke's water plan,” Mrs. Harrington said, watching a cluster of gentlemen conversing

nearby.

It was amazing. While they used to talk about Desborough with creased brows and in warning tones, now they appeared jovial and hopeful. They sounded as if they *liked* the duke and appreciated all the improvements he was making.

“Think of it,” one of them exclaimed. “Clean, easily accessible water in the village! For everyone!”

Georgiana glanced at her father. *His* brow was creased. Of course it was. Although she had passed him each and every one of Theo’s letters detailing his attempts to fix all the wrongs the old Duke of Desborough had subjected this area to, Papa remained firm in his disgust of everything St. Clair. Though Sebastian’s work on the tenant farms had been nothing short of miraculous—the St. Clair properties appeared fresh and gleaming—her father had not budged. Even Theo tearing down the offensive barn and rebuilding it in a more discreet location hadn’t moved him.

“I have enough evidence of his wrongdoings to condemn that man for more than a lifetime,” her father had proclaimed.

“You do not have any evidence whatsoever.” Georgiana had pointed out how the vast majority of his “evidence” concerned the *old* duke’s misdeeds. A small amount of it implicated Sebastian, who, she reminded her father, was an impressionable youth at the time bound by his father’s dictates. But *none* of it implicated Theo.

“He has an ulterior motive for all these false good deeds,” her father had persisted, then looked at her pointedly. “You.”

“He planned to remedy his father’s doings before he had anything to do with me,” Georgiana argued. She knew that to be true. At least, he’d *wanted* to solve all these problems...but back when she’d first encountered him at the house party, he hadn’t known how to go about it. Evidently, he’d been struck by inspiration after inspiration since then.

“And where is he obtaining the funds for it all?” her father asked suspiciously.

Georgiana hadn’t been able to readily answer that question,

so she had engaged in some research. Lord Trevelyan had been a great help in that endeavor, informing her that Theo was a silent majority owner of several hotels throughout England and on the Continent, a shipping endeavor rivaling the East India Company, and a large, profitable distillery in Ireland. Furthermore, Trevelyan said, he was heavily invested in technological advancements in railroad transportation and steam power.

She'd let her father know all this. She showed him how Theo had worked almost as diligently as her father had to build his fortune.

Still, his hatred for the St. Clairs ruled.

Now, as the musicians began to warm up for the first dance, her father grumbled, "Where is this 'engineer'? Is he in attendance tonight?"

Georgiana sent her father a warning glare. She would not allow him to interfere. She'd been blocking his attempts to foil Theo's plans ever since they'd arrived in the country.

"He is indeed!" Mrs. Harrington said. "Mr. Moretti is just over there, by the punch bowl." She gestured toward the refreshments table.

"Excuse me, ladies," her father said, and strode toward the Italian.

Oh dear. She turned to Mrs. Harrington. "Forgive me. I believe I need to follow him."

"Of course," Mrs. Harrington said. "I shall see you later, Miss Milford."

Georgiana hurried after her father, but a man intercepted her. "Miss Milford!"

Georgiana stepped back. "Oh. Good evening, Mr. Miller."

Miller was a London bachelor who owned a country cottage in the area. He gazed at her. "It has been a long time, Miss Milford. You look lovely tonight."

She hid a sigh of annoyance. He was one of her most persistent fortune-hunting suitors. One would think with such

salacious gossip about her running rampant through the country, they'd stop, but even though she was now "ruined," she was still the richest heiress in England, and the interest in her had hardly seemed to wane.

Well, she and Lizzie were the richest heiresses in England. Even Lizzie, who was seven-and-twenty and had been absent for the past nine years, had drawn a slew of predatory hopefuls knocking upon their door.

She gave Mr. Miller a tight smile. "Thank you. Now I—"

"Lovely weather we're having, isn't it? A little balmy for this time of year, but I do believe we're in for a bracing autumn season."

She gritted her teeth and nodded.

"Are you available for the reel?"

"Yes, Mr. Miller, but—"

"Wonderful!" he exclaimed with a bright, fake smile. "I'll see you then."

He bowed and moved away, and Georgiana arrowed through the crowd to the refreshments table.

As she pushed in beside her father, he was nodding, and her breath caught in her throat when she saw a slight smile on his face.

"Yes," he was saying to Mr. Moretti. "Yes, I believe that is an excellent plan to provide clean water to the village."

And there it was. The crack in her father's armor.

Throughout the following days, she worked to expand it. She invited the Harringtons to dinner. They won over her entire family with their graciousness and their commitment to the community. Of course, they brought up the duke and all he had done and was planning to do. Proponents of universal education, the Harringtons went on and on about the school the duke was helping them to build and how he was providing scholarships to promising students throughout the countryside.

On the day after their visit, Georgiana entered her father's

study and took the seat across the desk from him. Instead of speaking of business, which was what she usually did in this room with him, she said, "I'm going to write to the Duke of Desborough today."

His face went dark. "Gigi, you know how I feel about that man."

"Oh, I do," she said lightly. "And I know that, despite yourself, you are starting to understand that you judged his character prematurely and without supporting evidence."

Her father scowled. "Nevertheless, you are not to engage in correspondence with him."

"Oh, Papa," she said soberly. "I'm a woman full grown. I'm not *asking* you for permission to write him. I'm informing you, as a courtesy."

With that, she'd stood, brushed off her skirts, and left the room.

Dear Theo,

I have devoured every word of every letter you've sent me. I adore everything about what you've accomplished for our community.

I'm sorry I haven't responded until now, but I was giving you time—well, I was giving both of us time—to do what needed to be done.

Back at Elder Abbey, I was living under the assumption that my life could take two diverging roads. I thought if I chose either road, the other would be barricaded against me. But now I realize that someday I may travel along both of them freely, and that perhaps they will not fork into two different directions but instead merge together into one clear road for me to travel upon.

Does that sound like a farfetched dream to you?

I hope not.

Yours,

Georgiana

He responded the following day, this time sending the letter directly to Norton House for the first time. Unsurprisingly, her father intercepted the letter and opened it, then gave it to her later in the day with a questioning look on his face.

Dear Georgiana,

No, I do not believe it is farfetched.

I am still working to improve the road. There are still some bumps along the way, but I will keep toiling until it leads you safely home.

Theo

She read it, then stared at it for a few more moments, blinking hard. God, she missed him. She wanted to run to him right now and throw herself into his arms. But he'd said it wasn't time. Not yet.

But...it would be.

Patience, Georgiana. She took a deep breath.

“What on earth does that mean?” her father asked crossly. “The road to Norton House is in *perfect* repair.”

Georgiana sighed. “It means he’s going to prove his worthiness to you, Papa. To all of us. He won’t stop until he has.”

...

Theo’s neighbor was no longer fighting his every move. He knew that Milford had even offered his seal of approval to the improvements that he’d made in the village and that he was completely committed to the water project.

He’d still been surprised when all four of the Milfords agreed to attend the winter ball at Clairwood Park.

It was a miracle.

The day after he received the response, Theo called upon Milford at Norton House. He half expected that he wouldn’t be allowed to enter, so he was surprised and relieved when the man saw him in his study.

When Theo entered, they eyed each other for a few moments. Then, Theo drew in a deep breath and apologized.

“I’m so sorry,” he began.

There was so much to apologize for. He took the seat across Milford’s desk, set the satchel full of papers he’d brought aside, and started at the beginning.

“When I was a small boy,” he told the older man, “like everyone else within a hundred-mile radius, I witnessed how my father was ruining his home, the countryside, and his relationships with everyone around him. My mother attempted to teach me to rise above the St. Clair reputation, but I misinterpreted what she meant. I know now that she meant I must do what I could, while my father was alive, to help Clairwood Park and the community. That I must show kindness and temperance, maintain relationships that my father destroyed, and undo some of the damage he did. At the time, though, I thought that ‘rise above’ meant I must force myself to appear unaffected. Aloof, even uncaring. So that was what I did. I practiced this air of uncaring superiority from the time I was young, and now I’ve perfected it.” He sighed. “It’s taken me some time to melt that ice away, but I believe it’s gone now, once and for all.”

Milford watched him, a frown twisting his brow, but Theo went on. He’d barely scratched the surface.

“After my father sent me away to school, I learned quickly that the world outside Clairwood Park was far safer for me. I never wanted to return to the dark existence I faced at home. And that knowledge led me to my second mistake: I abandoned not only my mother and brother to my father’s immorality and viciousness, but also my friends and neighbors, the village, and everyone in this community. You will never know the depth of my shame nor the sincerity of my regret for that act.”

Theo’s hands were clasped so tightly on the chair arms, he could see the whites of his knuckles. He needed to go on. Lay it all out for this man who’d been his enemy for so long. But after what Theo’s family had done to his eldest daughter...

could he really blame Milford? If someone had destroyed someone Theo loved like the St. Clairs had destroyed Elizabeth, his well of rage would have no limit to its depth, either. He took a deep breath.

“When Miss Georgiana asked if I was complicit in what happened between my brother and her sister, I couldn’t say I wasn’t. Because, while I didn’t know anything about my father’s intentions for them, my deliberate avoidance of everything to do with the duke and this place made me complicit. So…” He swallowed hard. “I apologize, Mr. Milford. Your eldest daughter has suffered deeply at the hands of my family, and I will never forgive myself for that.”

Was that comprehension beginning to light in Milford’s eyes?

He continued. “Sebastian…well, please hear me when I say he was manipulated and coerced by our father. He has spent nine years punishing himself for what he did.”

Milford’s expression cooled again, his lips growing thin, and Theo nodded in understanding. “I am sorry,” he said quietly. “If I had been here, I would have tried to stop it.”

Milford’s eyes narrowed. “Would you? Are you not as covetous of my lands as the previous duke was?”

Theo raised his brows. “It takes every second of every day for me to manage what I *do* have. Why would I want more?”

“Because it is mine,” Milford said.

“I do not covet your lands,” Theo said. “I never have and never will.”

“But you do covet my daughter.”

And here it was. The point of this meeting.

...

They’d talked until Milford had been called away for dinner with his family, and Theo had slipped out.

The days until the ball arrived went by at a glacial pace. It

had felt like an eternity since Theo had seen Georgiana, since he'd held her in his arms, since she'd challenged him and laughed with him and talked to him. Even the flurry of preparations couldn't take his mind off seeing her again.

On the day of the ball, as Theo was supervising the decoration of the ballroom, Sebastian entered and stood next to him. They watched in silence for a while as a man up on a ladder placed new candles in one of the chandeliers.

Sebastian shook his head. "This place...remember how bad it smelled in here? How dark it was?"

"Yes," Theo said. "I remember."

"It's changed. Everything about this house has changed."

Theo nodded, then looked at his brother. *Sebastian* had changed. He was thinner now, freshly shaved. He'd taken up riding again. He'd stopped imbibing and fighting. His help had been invaluable to Theo over the past four months.

"Have I thanked you?" he asked.

Sebastian frowned. "For what?"

Theo shook his head. "Everything."

Sebastian huffed out a laugh. "I should be thanking you."

It was Theo's turn to raise his brows in surprise. "For what?"

"If I said 'for behaving like a brother for the first time in your life,' would that sound bitter?" Sebastian asked.

Theo breathed in slowly. "No. It would sound fair." He clasped Sebastian's shoulder. "I'm sorry. I just..." But there were no excuses, not really. Georgiana had said that he'd been too young to see what was going on with his brother. He'd felt like it had been too late. But he'd been wrong. He'd knowingly, purposely turned his back on his brother and all the problems that Clairwood Park and their father represented.

He was the duke now, and he couldn't freeze people out anymore. Running away from his problems was even worse. He loved his brother, and he loved Georgiana. He cared deeply about his neighbors and the many people who depended on

him for their livelihoods.

“I’m just sorry,” he told his brother quietly.

Sebastian nodded. “I am glad I could be a part of this.”

“I’m glad, too,” Theo said. Then, as they watched a maid come in with a bundle of linens, he said, “Will you be all right tonight?”

“With the Milfords, you mean?”

“Yes.”

Sebastian shrugged. “I cannot believe they’re allowing their daughters to come to our home. You’ve really worked a miracle, Theo. Don’t worry about me, though. I’ll be the soul of discretion. I will not approach them, but if they approach me, you won’t see me being anything other than a proper gentleman.”

Theo smirked. His brother, volunteering to be a gentleman. Yet another miracle.

Sebastian leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes tracking the servants as they bustled about. The place looked magnificent. “Mama would have loved this, wouldn’t she?”

“Yes.” Theo swallowed hard, wishing his mother was still alive to be a part of this night. To see what he had done. He closed his eyes, and he could feel her approval like a warm brush of air washing over him.

“Oh goodness!”

Theo opened his eyes to see Charlotte standing in the arched doorway. She and Trevelyan had traveled up for the ball and had been staying at Clairwood Park for the past week.

“It looks beautiful, Ridge,” Charlotte breathed.

He nodded. “It does, doesn’t it?”

She put her hand on his arm. “Georgiana is going to love it.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

It was in the spirit of community that the Milfords had agreed to attend the Duke of Desborough's winter ball. At least, that's what Georgiana's father told them.

Georgiana knew it was more than that, though. Over the past month, her father had completely abandoned his crusade against the St. Clair family. He hadn't commented on Sebastian, who had, by all accounts, been totally reformed. Her father had, however, been heard in public settings giving brief words of praise regarding the duke himself.

Now, dressed in a sheer white muslin overdress with seashell-embroidered and pearl-encrusted trim over sleek ivory satin, Georgiana stood in the entryway to the duke's ballroom as their arrival was announced. "Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Milford, Miss Elizabeth Milford, and Miss Georgiana Milford!"

They stepped inside as the hushed crowd parted before them. Everyone here knew of the long history of the Milfords and the St. Clairs and about Georgiana and Theo's failed wedding. This moment would be talked about in drawing rooms for months to come.

When she at last laid eyes on Theo, her chest squeezed so tight she couldn't breathe. How long it had been since she'd seen him. Months. Impossibly heartbreaking, lonely months.

He was more handsome than she remembered. He was perfection in black and white, the dark tailcoat with black velvet collar and silk waistcoat fitting his lean body with absolute precision and contrasting with the crisp whiteness of his pantaloons, shirt, and cravat. The fabrics were exquisite, the stitching immaculate.

But his face... It held none of that aloof sarcasm she remembered. Instead, his smile and blue eyes were brimming with warmth as he approached them.

He greeted her father first, shaking his hand as if they were

two friendly business associates. Georgiana blinked when her father amiably clapped Theo on the shoulder. When Papa released him, Theo bowed to her mother. Georgiana bit her lip, hoping her mother held on to her composure.

In the end, Mama had been the one who persevered in her dislike of the St. Clairs with the most fervor. Two St. Clairs had been responsible for the ruination of her daughters—her *only* daughters, she often reminded them—after all. But now, she gave a wobbly smile and curtsied to the duke, and Georgiana let out a breath of relief.

Then, Theo turned to her and Lizzie. He bowed to Lizzie. “Miss Milford.” Then he turned to Georgiana. They stared at each other.

I love you, she wanted to tell him. *I never stopped. Not for one second.*

He nodded slightly, as if he’d heard her thoughts, then bowed. “Miss Georgiana. Welcome.”

She curtsied. “Your Grace. Thank you for inviting us.”

“Always,” he murmured.

They merged with the crowd. The ballroom was beautiful, glittering with hundreds of candles and awash with the fresh scents of cinnamon and apples.

Georgiana made conversation as best she could with neighbors and acquaintances. She hugged Charlotte and Lord Trevelyan. She danced with a gentleman, then switched partners with Lizzie and danced with another.

But she couldn’t stop her gaze from straying to Theo. He was busy talking to people, making his guests feel welcome. Again and again, he caught her eye. There was so much in his expression, she couldn’t begin to pick it apart.

She wanted to speak with him alone. She wanted to tell him she was ready. The road she wanted to travel was solid, flat, and wide. She wanted him.

It was time.

After a festive country dance, she and Lizzie stood at the

refreshments table, Lizzie smiling as she retrieved a glass of punch. Georgiana had been worried about her sister tonight, but she was glowing.

Drinks in hand, they took a few steps away from the table. “Are you having a nice time?” she asked her sister.

Lizzie laughed. “You need to stop worrying about me, Gigi. I’m seven-and-twenty, not some blushing debutante. I am fine. In fact, I am having a wonderful time.”

“I’m glad.” Georgiana leaned forward and spoke quietly. “Have you seen him?”

They both knew she meant Lord Sebastian.

“Of course. But he is keeping his distance, and so am I.”

Georgiana nodded.

“But even if he wasn’t,” Lizzie said, “it would be all right. What happened between us was years ago.”

“If that’s truly the case, then perhaps you will change your mind and stay in England,” Georgiana said. She’d been trying to get her sister to agree to stay, but Lizzie had been insistent on returning to Halifax. “I have a life there now,” she’d told Georgiana. “A home. Friends. Family.”

“You have family *here*,” Georgiana had argued. “*England* is your home.”

Now, Lizzie shook her head. “You are relentless.”

“Of course I am! I miss you dreadfully when you are gone.”

“I’ll miss you, too.” Lizzie’s eye caught on something just past Georgiana’s shoulder, and she stiffened slightly.

Georgiana turned. Theo was standing there. He bowed. They curtsied.

She felt like laughing hysterically at the formality of it, given how intimate they’d been. She thought of his head between her legs and took a steady breath.

“Your house is magnificent, Your Grace,” Lizzie said.

Neither Georgiana nor her sister had seen Clairwood Park in

person before. It was nothing like how it had been described to her in the past—Gothic, dark and dirty, filled with ghosts and unhappiness. This place was bright, modern, and cheerful.

“Thank you.” He smiled at Lizzie. “It is a work in progress.”

“And this party,” Georgiana said. “It is spectacular.”

He glanced around at the groups nearby. Everyone was talking animatedly, laughing gaily under the twinkling lights. “It is a little different than we anticipated, though, isn’t it?”

She remembered their discussion about a potential winter ball, how she’d guaranteed her father would never come. Not only had her father attended—and was appearing to have just as wonderful a time as everyone else—but he’d encouraged others to come as well. As a result, the place was teeming with people from all over the countryside, far different from the image she’d had of two or three lonely people wandering around a vast, gloomy space when her father had convinced the entire county to avoid the duke’s ball.

She smiled back at him. “Quite different.”

He captured her hand in his. “They’re starting a waltz. Would you care to dance, Miss Georgiana?”

She breathed out. She’d thought he’d never ask. She’d care very much to dance. “Yes.”

She glanced back at her sister as Theo led her to the floor. Grinning broadly, Lizzie was giving her a little wave. Their parents had flanked her and were watching as well. Georgiana couldn’t quite read the expressions on their faces.

Theo drew her attention back to him as he stopped in the middle of the floor and bowed to her, then took her hand in his again and slipped his arm around her waist.

She slid her hand up his shoulder over the fine, soft wool of his tailcoat and breathed in his familiar scent of rosemary and cloves.

“Ready?” he murmured in her ear.

He would never know just how ready she was. “Yes.”

He swept her into the dance, and though there were so many things she wanted—needed—to say to him, she found that words weren't necessary. Not just yet. Being held by him again was enough for now. Feeling his hand wrapped tight over hers and the clasp of his arm around her waist. Looking into his eyes and seeing what she'd seen there before, now raw and open and unmasked.

It had been difficult at times over the past weeks and months to not allow doubt to creep in. To wonder if his love had faded over time, or to allow the most insidious thought of all to invade—perhaps he had never really loved her at all.

She had always pushed those thoughts aside and, as challenging as it had been, kept her faith in him and his love for her.

It had been worth it. Because he still loved her. It was there. In his touch, in his movements, in his smile. There was no doubt of it. And she was certain that anyone watching them right now would see it, too. That mist of love swirling around them in a rainbow of color every time he turned her in the waltz.

He slowed his movements, and she came out of the haze of the dance, shocked that it was already over. How could that be? She didn't want it to end. She never wanted it to end.

They stopped, and his arm slipped from around her as he released her hand. She stepped back to give him the obligatory curtsy but then realized the dance floor had cleared. They were standing in the center of it...alone.

She looked back at Theo, her eyes widening in shock as the musicians went silent and the entire ballroom quieted. Every eye turned to them.

He took both her hands in his own and squeezed. "I have never been one for public announcements," he said, his voice ringing across the space so that every single person here would hear every word with clarity. "Nor for putting my feelings on display. However, today, that is going to change."

Her eyes went wide. Good Lord, what was he about to do?

“Theo—”

He shook his head. “Let me speak. Please.”

She closed her mouth.

“At times, I have been known to behave as if I don’t care,” he said. “But I do. I care about my home. I care about everyone here tonight. I care about the Milford family and all my neighbors.”

“We know, Your Grace,” someone called out from the sidelines. A few people made various noises of agreement.

Theo gazed into her eyes. “And I care for you, Georgiana Milford. I love you.”

Oh God. Was he going to propose? But this wasn’t how it was done. It was done with quiet gestures in private moments in drawing rooms. Behind closed doors. Never like this...so publicly.

A vise had wrapped around her lungs. Each of the eyes on her burned like pricks of heat over her skin. Georgiana couldn’t breathe.

He went on. “I attempted to make you my bride a few months ago. But that was neither the right time nor the right place, and I bungled the whole thing. Badly.”

A few people laughed.

“However, I’d like to try again.” In front of the entire party, he knelt down on one knee and gazed up at her. “My heart is yours, Georgiana. I pledge, before all of the friends and family present here tonight, that I will do everything in my power, for the rest of my life, to make you the happiest woman alive.”

“Theo—”

“I promise that I will never again hide my love for you behind a carefree mask or a closed door. I promise that I will never run from loving you. I vow to love you openly and without reservation, and I will defend that love until I take my dying breath.”

She stared down into his handsome face. The face of the man

she trusted. Who she admired. Who she loved beyond measure.

“Georgiana, will you marry me?” he asked.

She glanced back toward the refreshments table. There was her family, all three of them holding hands and watching, expressions of approval on their faces. She blinked at them in surprise. Her father nodded slightly in encouragement.

She didn’t need his approval, though. She didn’t need anyone’s approval. If she didn’t have it, she’d say yes regardless. But having her family’s support meant the world. And the fact that Theo had earned that support with his commitment and hard work made it all the sweeter.

She turned back to Theo and looked into his blue, blue eyes. She swallowed back the thickness in her throat. And then she nodded. “Yes,” she said, her voice loud and clear. “Yes, Theo. I will marry you.”

He breathed out, and his eyelashes swept downward in a long blink. Then he looked back up at her and rose to standing. He pulled her into his arms and pressed his lips to hers.

Georgiana only vaguely heard the cheers as she wrapped her arms around him and kissed him back, the pressure of his lips, his taste, his body consuming her senses.

This time, nothing would stop them from being together.

Epilogue

Ten Months Later

It had been the best harvest in years, thanks to Theo's efforts, and the packed assembly rooms at the autumn harvest festival brimmed with bright lights and the sounds of laughter.

Georgiana stood side by side with her husband, watching the festivities. Her parents danced by, her mother breathless and pink as she smiled up at Papa. Georgiana shook her head at Theo. "Lately, it's like they're newly wed, I swear."

Theo gave a low laugh. "It's because your father has stepped back from the business and has more time for her, I daresay."

Georgiana nodded. Her father was working less lately. He'd distributed work to a few trusted employees, including her. "She adores the extra attention."

Theo nudged her. "Look."

She followed Theo's eyes to the middle of the room, where Sebastian and Lizzie were dancing. They were gazing at each other.

"I know that expression," Theo murmured.

Georgiana nodded. Sebastian's countenance when he regarded Lizzie reminded her of how Theo looked at her.

"I don't know what holds him back," Theo said quietly.

"Perhaps her incessant wavering on returning to Nova Scotia," Georgiana said. Lizzie had extended her stay for over a year now, though she still hadn't committed to remaining permanently in England.

Theo frowned at her. "She's still talking about returning?"

"Just this morning, she said she was thinking of going back." Georgiana sighed. "I don't understand it."

"Well, she did spend a third of her life there," Theo said. "She feels deeply attached to the place."

Georgiana smiled at him. “You are so observant,” she said. “I love that about you.”

“I love *everything* about you.” His gaze made a hot trail up and down her body. “Including that dress.” He leaned forward and said into her ear, “I’d especially love taking it off you.”

She raised a brow. “Oh, would you?”

He nodded. “Very much.”

“Then I think it’s time we went home, don’t you?”

...

An hour later, they were in their bedchamber, a light and airy space they’d decorated together the very week of their marriage, which, thanks to the special license Theo had procured, had taken place downstairs a day after the winter ball. Most of the people who’d attended the ball had been there to witness the happiest day of Theo’s life.

Now, he and his wife stood facing each other before the hearth, which was burning cheerfully, casting its warmth over them.

He studied his wife in the flickering light of the fire. “God, you’re beautiful.”

She preened. “You know I’ll become vain if you keep telling me that.”

“Yet you wouldn’t have me stop.”

She grinned at him. “Never.”

“Turn around, minx,” he said.

She gazed at him for a moment, her eyes glowing amber in the firelight, then slowly turned. She’d let her silky blond hair down earlier, and he gently moved it aside before turning his attention to the row of buttons down her back.

“Your love for fashion does not help me in my quest to undress you rapidly,” he grumbled minutes later when he’d only progressed with the tiny pearl buttons halfway down.

“My love for fashion will never fade, so you will simply

have to endure it.” She sent him a saucy glance over her shoulder.

He leaned forward and kissed her just under her ear. “Ooh, I think a little torture is in order for that.” He bit her lobe gently.

“Torture, hm?” The minx sounded intrigued. Not afraid in the least.

“Of the worst kind.” He kissed her in that sensitive spot again, and she shuddered.

“The very worst?” she said hopefully.

“The *very* worst.”

She hummed. “Oh, good.”

He finished the buttons, then the ties of her undergarments, and helped her out of them. When she bent down to undo her garters, he pressed his palm over the ribbon ties. “Oh no. The shoes and stockings stay on.”

She stood, and he studied her for a moment. She stood naked before him, as she had that night in her bedchamber at Elder Abbey over a year ago, when she’d dropped her towel after she’d stepped out of the bath. But now, instead of being wet, her hair was down in shining waves past her shoulders and she was smiling at him with a glint in her eyes, anticipating whatever he had in store for her.

God, he loved this woman. And he intended to show her once again exactly how much.

“Sit.” He gestured to the armchair placed before the fire. He pulled his shirt over his head as she sat and then knelt in front of her, drawing her bottom to the edge of the chair, then pushing her knees apart and pressing his face between her legs.

He made her come twice that way, but not until she admitted that his refusing to let her reach her climax was the *very* worst torture of all. The second time, she cried out and pulled his hair, and his cock hardened to a spike in his pantaloons. When she came down from the orgasm, he kissed her and said against her mouth, “God, Georgiana. What you do to me...”

“What are you talking about?” she said breathlessly. “What you do to *me*...”

He laughed against her lips. “Let’s go to bed.”

He finished undressing and joined her under the bedclothes, pulling her tight against him. “I love you,” she whispered as he finally pushed inside her and she arched up to meet him.

He held himself still and gazed down at her. Gently, he moved a lock of hair out of her face. He looked into her dark eyes and smiled. “You make me so happy.” He bent down to press a kiss to her lips. “I love you, too, Georgiana. So damn much.”

“Good,” she said. “Now stop talking and make love to me.”

He rolled his eyes, but then he did just that.

Later, when he was almost asleep, she slid her arms around him. “You make me happy, too, Theo,” she whispered.

He smiled. He thought about his staff, all secure in their positions. His tenants, all settled and content. His neighbors, who respected him and had become his friends. The villagers, who now had access to plentiful clear, clean water. His brother, who was becoming an admirable man in his own right. And his wife, who loved him.

He’d corrected his father’s many sins. On top of that, he’d found a woman he admired and adored, and who loved him with all her heart.

Best of all, they made each other happy.

He could ask for nothing more.



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About the Author

USA Today bestselling author [Jennifer Haymore](#) is the author of over a dozen award-winning historical romances. When she's not dreaming up scandal in Regency England, you'll likely find her avidly listening to an audiobook while sailing, walking her spoiled husky, or on an airplane heading off to visit the exciting locale of her next novel. Jennifer loves reading romance and writing happily ever afters, and she's grateful to all her readers for giving her an opportunity to share her stories with the world.

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