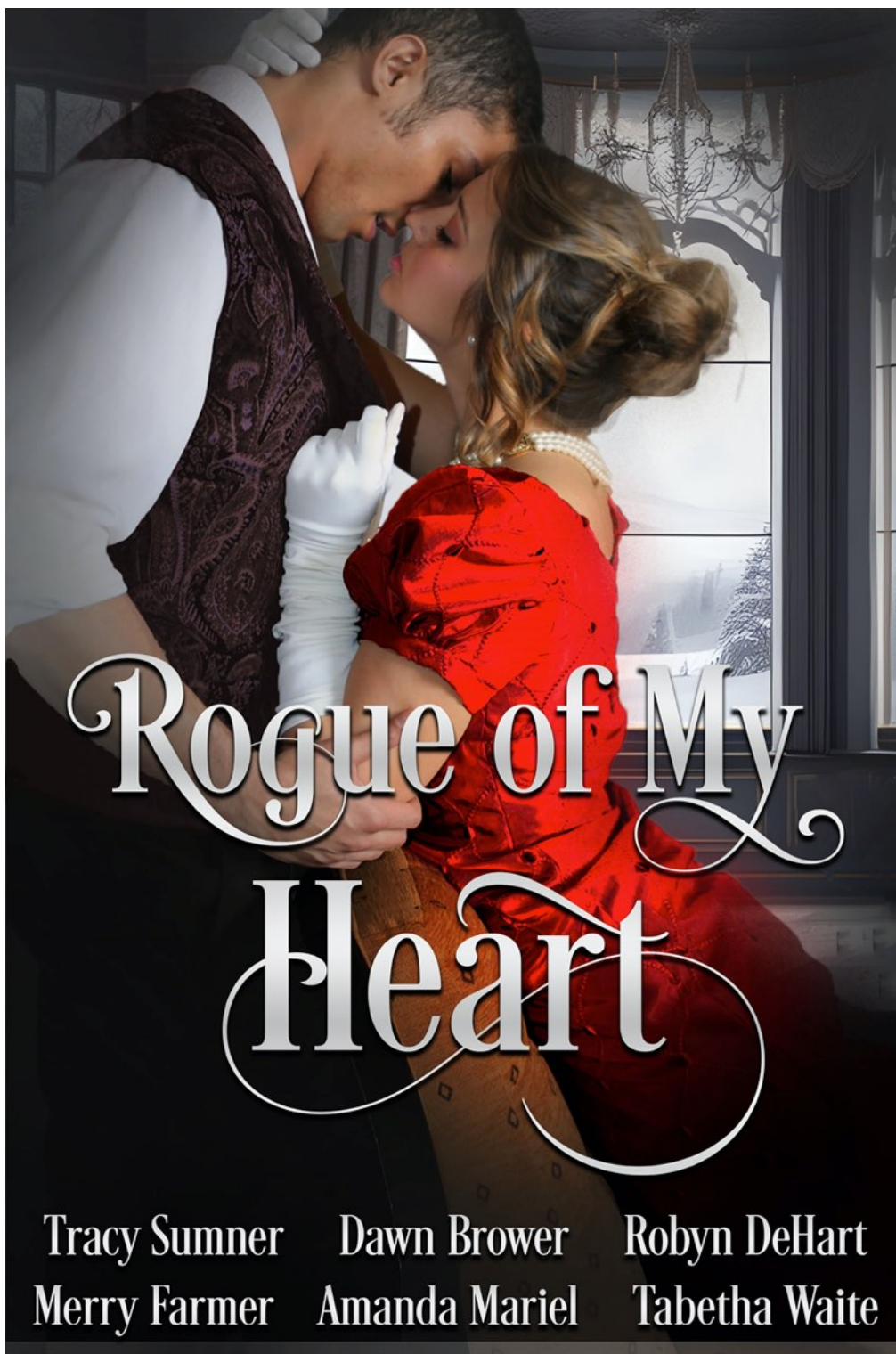


Rogue of My Heart

Tracy Sumner
Merry Farmer

Dawn Brower
Amanda Mariel

Robyn DeHart
Tabetha Waite



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TRACY SUMNER DAWN BROWER MERRY FARMER
ROBYN DEHART AMANDA MARIEL TABETHA WAITE

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Tempting the Scoundrel



TRACY SUMNER

Prologue



An evening when young love is in the air...

Tavistock House, Mayfair

July 1808

The girl captivated him from first sight, fascination a delightful little shiver along his skin.

As she had every night he'd been in residence, she huddled in the veranda's dark corner, book in hand, an oil lamp illuminating the page she brought close to the tarnished glass globe. A housemaid, she read in secret. And hungrily.

He could feel her determination, her daring, from his perch one story above.

Determination matching his own.

Christian Bainbridge braced his hands on the ledge of his bedchamber window and leaned into a spill of moonlight, releasing a half-laugh at his foolishness. There was nothing poetic about this night, this house, or his circumstances. The air reeked of coal smoke and charred meat, rotting vegetables and the Thames, familiar even in its wretchedness. Cousin to the Earl of Tavistock, whose home Christian currently

occupied, he was stuck in the slender crack between the aristocracy and the middling classes, welcome in neither.

The loneliest place to wedge oneself, he'd come to find.

After the recent death of his beloved brother, Christian was alone in the world except for the earl, a man rumored—and, regrettably, the rumors were true—to have several significant deficits of character.

To Christian's mind, the worst being that he failed to maintain his timepieces.

Christian glanced back to the pocket watch parts spread across the desk, candlelight dancing over metal coils, serrated wheels, the blunt edge of a screwdriver. You could tell much about a person from the way they tended their treasures.

The earl tended his poorly.

Tavistock had little care for his belongings, his tenants, his staff, or his hapless fifteen-year-old cousin. Leading Christian to make the rash decision to accept an apprenticeship he'd been offered with a prominent watchmaker in Cambridge. He had another term at Harrow to complete, but there were no funds, not one farthing left to sustain further education. And Christian was not willing to accept additional charity from a man he'd come to loathe.

The situation was actually as it should be because Christian had never been interested in anything but the art of repairing timepieces.

And when he was ready, designing his own.

Before this girl, only gears and coils and springs had captured his attention.

He'd asked a groom, a footman, and finally, the housekeeper for her name, because he'd felt he must learn it before leaving the estate at dawn. Raine Mowbray, he'd been told.

A young woman who now held a unique position in his universe.

Love at first sight did that to a boy.

There was something elemental about his reaction to Raine, more extraordinary than mere appreciation for her loveliness. Lust, he supposed, but it felt like more. He had little experience with women, so he couldn't accurately categorize his response.

He'd only seen her once up close, no words exchanged, no eye contact made, as she rushed through the walled garden and into the kitchens, the aroma of roses overpowering until the subtle scent of lemon and lavender clinging to her skin swept in and knocked all else aside. Blew every thought from his mind and left him stranded, like a withered leaf dangling from a limb.

It sounded melodramatic, but his heart had raced inside with her.

While she hadn't paused or blinked or seemed to notice him at all.

Which was a good thing. Christian was leaving, he was destitute, lacking in funds, family, or friends. Too young to matter, too old to indulge. His future, which was going to be bloody *brilliant* he pledged to himself right there in the cloying twilight, lay in Cambridge, not London.

He was going to make his way on his own, his awful cousin be damned.

The girl on the veranda moved the book into the light, turned a page with a delicate shift of her wrist, smiled softly at a twist in the story. He wished with everything in him that they'd been able to talk, he and Raine Mowbray. Even once. For a moment. About anything. Her voice was a mystery to him, and for that, he was genuinely sorrowful, because she looked as lonely as he felt.

Willing himself to turn away, Christian returned to his cousin's watch and his promise to restore the neglected timepiece before he left London. When repaired, it would provide an accurate accounting for a man who didn't deserve precision.

But such was life.

Christian placed the loupe against his eye and plunged into his task.

Preparing to walk away from one fascination and toward another.

One



A morning long after love had been forsaken...

Hartland Abbey, Yorkshire

June 1818

Raine stared out the duchess's drawing room window, the oilcloth in her hand forgotten. Her intention to dust the sashes and neat white frame forgotten.

There was something unusual about the tall, strikingly handsome man who'd arrived at the estate and now stood on the crushed-stone drive talking with Lord Jonathan, the Duke of Devon's eldest son. She gave the baseboard a punishing buff, searching her memory.

He seemed *familiar*, which was absurd.

Raine cataloged his features, trying to solve the puzzle. Square jaw, dark, disheveled hair, tastefully elegant suit of clothing, polished Hessians glinting in the sunlight. A curl of amusement about his lips, lines of delight streaking from his eyes, he looked rather like a man who held a secret close. A hint of mischievousness beneath an almost bookish air. Spellbound, she watched him gesture to a passing footman who'd unloaded a bevy of cases from a landau and was struggling to carry them inside the house, the man's regard for

his belongings—which didn't look like the customary sartorial fripperies the *ton* dragged to Yorkshire—possessive and intense. Whatever was in those gleaming wooden cases mattered to their visitor. His gaze followed the boxes up the marble stairs and into the house with the longing one usually reserved for a paramour.

“They say he refused a knighthood.”

Raine flinched, the oilcloth dropping from her hand to the Aubusson carpet. Ellen Bruce, one of the other housemaids, giggled and winked. In the duke's employ since she was a child, Ellen knew everyone and *heard* everything, while Raine had only been on the estate for six paltry months.

Therefore she knew almost nothing.

“A knighthood dangled before him for repairing the Prince Regent's fickle pocket watch,” Ellen murmured with a sly glance cast toward the drive. “Can you imagine such a thing? Royalty be daft, Prinny especially. That's what I think, if anyone asks me, which they likely won't.”

“Who are you referring to?” Raine stooped to pick up her cleaning cloth, hopefully hiding her curiosity about the intriguing stranger, inquisitiveness that a house servant of a magnificent house such as Hartland Abbey should not have about a guest.

“Mister Christian Bainbridge, that's who. Friendly with Lord Jonathan since his school days, he's stayed here one or two times in the past.” Ellen pranced over to the grand fireplace and gave the intricate trim a passing swipe with her duster that in no way accounted for housework. She laughed, throwing a playful look over her shoulder, knowing she had a captive audience. “It's said he designs the most accurate timepieces in England, and you know the duke cannot stand to

be late for any appointment. In this house, nothing but a Bainbridge will do.”

Wordlessly, they watched the celebrated watchmaker stroll past the drawing room, his footfalls echoing off marble, providing another brief look that confirmed he was as appealing inside the house as he was out of it.

“A most eligible bachelor but a duke’s daughter would be reaching too high. Although he’s here to court timepieces, not unmarried ladies,” Ellen whispered, breathless with delight at the opportunity to impart this much gossip in one sitting. “He has more money than half the peerage what with their silly extravagances and base business sense. And so attractive, too.” She turned, her duster poised like a sword, and gave it a little jab. “He’ll get one look at you, and poof, be smitten! It happened with Nash in seconds flat. You could have knocked him over with a feather after meeting you that first time.” She sniffed and returned to her half-hearted dusting. “As if you would dally with a groom. Poor besotted Nash. This one, however, is *no* groom, but a dangerous man. According to the broadsheets, Mister Bainbridge only cares for wenches and watches, so don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Raine held back a spurt of laughter and circled the room to check the water level in the many vases scattered about the charming parlor. It was no wonder the space smelled like one stood in the middle of a rose thicket. Wenches and watches, indeed. She wanted nothing *less* than to unwittingly capture another man’s attention, for her life to be dictated by his whims, weakness, or unfed appetites. Even if the newly-arrived scoundrel *had* imparted a slight quiver in her knees, thankfully well hidden beneath her skirt.

For now, she wanted, *needed* hard work and solitude. And a vast library where she could read to her heart's content without being accosted.

Nothing more, nothing less.

Ellen gave the hearth another unproductive bit of consideration. "Our duke likes to rescue people, he does. Give back in reward for his good fortune. Like he did with Miss Abigail, who has a new life. A new husband! Such a lovely conclusion, don't you think? A merry bit of matchmaking if I do say so myself."

Raine paused by the escritoire desk sitting in a darkened corner. *Ah*, Miss Bruce had a motive after all. Raine would have liked to argue that she hadn't needed rescuing, but she was nothing if not practical. She could admit the truth if only to herself. If not for the Duke and Duchess of Devon, she'd still be working at Tavistock House, living under the wicked, abhorrent thumb of the earl. Shoving a bureau in front of the attic door each night to keep him out. "My eldest brother is acquainted with Thomas Kingston, the duke's footman, and he recommended me for the vacant maid's position. The earl was reducing his staff due to financial constraints. It's as simple as that."

Of course, it wasn't, but why discuss an unfortunate situation when a resolution had been so generously offered? A resolution humbly but promptly taken.

Ellen stilled with a reluctant release of breath, her gaze going molten, her tears apparent from across the room. "Whatever your story, you're safe now. This is the finest household in England. The most generous of families to serve."

Raine sighed and turned to gaze out the window, noting Mister Bainbridge's landau was still parked in the drive. *What color are his eyes*, she wondered. How did one design a watch to be the most accurate in the country?

And why had she felt as if she recognized him the moment he stepped from his carriage?



CHRISTIAN UNPACKED HIS TOOLS IN THE PANELED STUDY THE Duke of Devon had graciously assigned to him, the niggling hint of unease he'd experienced since arriving decreasing with each treasured instrument he touched. Some items he'd purchased years ago when he'd had to decide between a new screwdriver or food for the week. Tweezers, pliers, oilers, files, calipers. A small, French wheel-cutting engine. The velvet-lined box of crystals sat at the bottom of one case. He breathed a sigh of relief; he hadn't forgotten them. Devon had mentioned a cracked face in one of his messages.

Christian wasn't used to traveling with his equipment. He rarely made home visits—but the man *was* a duke.

And *he*, Christian Bainbridge, could have been a knight, which verified the insanity said to roam the halls of Carlton House. He prayed he didn't have to visit Prinny again this year.

Gordon Pennington, his trusty partner, stumbled into the room, swearing beneath his breath, and kicking the study door shut behind him. "Did you truly need all of these? Enough gadgets to repair every device in Yorkshire. Didn't we discuss learning to work with less?" He deposited a trunk to the floor

with a thump and a groan, then sent Christian a look that said, *don't say a word*.

“Some business associate you are,” Christian murmured with a smile he made sure to cast away from the man who was, in reality, his best friend. His only friend.

“I’m a guard, Kit, not a business associate.” With a grunt, he went to his knee, produced a knife from his waistcoat pocket, and proceeded to pick the trunk’s lock.

Christian rolled his eyes. “I have the key, you know. And remember, Penny, to the *ton*, you’re my valet.” Although broad-shouldered, ham-fisted Penny looked like no valet Christian had ever seen.

“No need for a key. Your *valet* trained in the back alleys of Whitechapel in preparation for his duties protecting the most expensive timepieces in Christendom. And the watchmaker who created them. Thievery, lockpicking, forgery. Gordon Pennington, at your service.” He snapped the knife shut and slipped it in his pocket. “I’m ill-used in this role, to put it plainly. But the pay is ample, the attire first-rate, and the danger slight. Women like the valet title, too, I’ve found. Makes me seem refined.”

Christian laughed and situated his tools in a neat row on the duke’s rather imposing mahogany desk. “I thought it a good idea after you saved me from being gutted on the docks all those years ago to repay the favor and offer you a more enviable position. Plus, weren’t we both surprised to find that you’re the best bookkeeping in the city? Larceny certainly fostered a talent for addition and subtraction. I’d be lost without you.” He shifted to remove a folio from his satchel, unwittingly releasing a hint of jasmine. A strong enough presence to brush aside the aroma of leather and bergamot

currently occupying the study. Katherine liked to scent her letters, and he'd crammed one in his bag as he rushed from his Berkeley Square townhome. "By the by, did you have the necklace delivered?"

Penny snickered and collapsed into an armchair, sending his long legs into a sprawl before him. "Your typical parting gift with me as solemn messenger, you mean? Then, yes, I did. Lady Wheaton was composed but furious. Slammed the door in my face. *After* snatching your expensive settlement from my hand." He yawned and stacked one glossy boot atop the other. "Why not give them a watch when you've decided enough is enough? I'll allow you a steep discount and even have it engraved for free. Your jeweler is robbing you blind with these tokens of lost affection."

"Not going to happen," Christian said and perched his hip against the desk, the folio spilling open in his hands, Katherine Wheaton's letter peeking from behind a bent page to mock him. His watches were personal; he'd poured his whole bloody *existence* into their creation. It was like giving a part of himself away when he sold one, which he realized was ridiculous for a man of trade.

The first time he'd taken a watch apart and put it back together had been the only time, aside from the girl on the veranda who'd knocked the breath from him years ago at Tavistock House, when his heart had wholly ruled his mind.

When he fell in love, *if* he ever fell in love, his wife would wear one of his watches. Which would mean more to him than any ring ever could. He would wait to find the woman who would understand that. Who would know without him having to tell her.

He slammed the folio shut, feeling the sting of dissatisfaction.

That was not happening as he'd given up on love.

At the moment, his loneliness was palpable but hidden, thriving despite the adoring mistresses he surrounded himself with. He'd tried, repeatedly, but there seemed little point in searching for what was not *there*. Had only been there that one time, a spark he'd extinguished by leaving before he even spoke to the girl.

"You're getting that sullen look again," Penny murmured from the chair, his lids low, close to sleep if Christian had his guess. "And we have no women, not yet, to lift you from your melancholy."

Christian shook himself from his stupor, slipped a letter from the folio, and flipped it between his hands. "I'm worried about the translations, which I'd hoped to work on during my time here," he lied, tapping the envelope against his palm. "A German watchmaker I'm in contact with tried to build a detached escapement caliber, but it failed, and he sent me details on the design in the event I'd like to have a go. But German's not my area of expertise, and English not his. Parts of the missive are incomprehensible, at least to me."

"I took care of it, whatever an escapement caliber is," Penny said with another yawn. "I discussed your dilemma with Miss Miller, the housekeeper, upon our arrival. A lovely thing with the bluest eyes you've ever seen. Like the sky in the middle of summer. Delightful. But back to the problem. There's a maid, new on staff, talented with languages." He settled his linked fingers over his belly and stretched his shoulders. "Assisting the governess with those subjects or some such. Unusual skill for a housemaid, isn't it? I guess this

one loves to read and taught herself several languages. Imagine, a bluestocking residing in the wilds of Yorkshire.” He toed one boot off, then the other, preparing for the kind of serious slumber only Penny could fall into, anywhere, anytime. “Starting tomorrow morning, nine sharp, you have a translator. One hour per day for the duration of your stay if you need her. You’re welcome in advance.”

“What an amazing valet you are, Penny.”

“It’s a gift.”

Christian dipped his finger beneath the flap of the envelope and broke the wax seal. “Does the bluestocking have a name?”

“Mowbray,” Penny whispered, definitely on the edge of sleep. “Miss Mowbray.”

The name danced through Christian’s consciousness, sending goosebumps zinging along his skin. He forced his hand from its punishing clench on the envelope. “Her first name, do you know it?”

Penny opened one eye, a lazy blink. “Raine. Is that French? I only remember because of Miss Miller’s eyes. Like rain falling from the clouds. Isn’t that poetic? I may try to use that.”

Christian’s breath caught, the letter sliding from his grip to bounce off the toe of his Hessian. “Whose house did Miss Mowbray recently arrive from?”

Penny dropped a bent arm over his face, shrugged. “An earl’s, I believe it was. A household going through a spot of trouble. A reprobate.”

“Holy hell,” Christian breathed, his heart kicking into a swift rhythm. There could be no one else with that name

working for an earl with an appalling reputation. The coincidence was simply too much.

It was the girl he'd spent the summer watching. The summer dreaming of but never talking to. Years cursing himself for not trying, at the very least, to make her acquaintance. To be her friend when it seemed neither of them had been so lucky as to have one.

Her image, faded like it had sat too long in the sun, rotated through his mind. Hair the color of a shiny gold coin, dark eyes, shy smile. Slender and lovely and *connected* to him in a gut-sure way he couldn't explain.

Had never been able to explain.

He turned to gaze at the verdant slice of lawn outside the study's window, his chest tight, his fingertips tingling.

Tomorrow morning, he was finally going to meet the woman he'd been in love with for ten years.

Two



Raine adjusted the mobcap that never seemed to contain her unruly mass of hair, and with an anxious exhalation, blew the ruffled brim from her face. She stood before the door to the duke's study, ten minutes late for her translation session because she'd volunteered to assist Miss Miller with a chore a kitchen maid should have taken on. She'd been delaying the inevitable because she was nervous. Agitated for no good reason. Trying to squelch the adolescent butterfly-tingle in her belly. Appalling when she was far removed from—

Then he was there, the cause of her belly-tingle, opening the door, watch in hand. As if he'd been about to check the hall to see if she'd arrived. He was out of breath, dark hair tousled, cravat off-center. But not vexed as most men of her acquaintance would be by her tardiness. Instead, Christian Bainbridge, lover of wenchies and watches, standing so close she could smell the delicate scent of citrus and ink drifting from his skin, had a tender, very fetching, very charming smile on his face.

And his eyes, because she'd wondered about them all night...

Oh, *heavens*, were his eyes a dazzling portrait, as blue as the delphiniums in the duchess's garden.

“It *is* you,” he whispered beneath his breath, a statement she had no idea how to decipher. Had Miss Miller told him to expect her? Had he been expecting someone else? Had she mistaken the arranged time?

Discomfited, she smoothed her apron, the newest in her possession, and stayed from reaching to adjust her cap. The plain, somewhat dour dress assigned to the staff she could do nothing about. Although it looked better on slim figures than it did on curvaceous ones, so she could tally this benefit. When benefiting the imposing man standing before her in dark, finely-tailored clothing was absurd to contemplate.

His smile grew as she fidgeted, creating a tiny dent in his cheek. A glorious imperfection in an otherwise extremely handsome face. “Miss Mowbray, I presume,” he said and gestured for her to enter the duke’s study. “I can’t express how delighted I am to meet you.”

Oh. He seemed quite enthusiastic about the translation session. She hoped her German was on par with his needs. She gazed up into his face because he was tall enough that she had to. “Sir, I—”

“No.” His expression shifted in an instant. Hardened, a flash of emotion confirming there was more to him than the bland smile and a compelling dimple. “My name is Christian,” he managed, then laughed and shook his head, leaving the door properly ajar behind them. An escape route should she need one. “So easy, and yet, ten years overdue.”

She entered the room, clearly missing some element of the situation. The *ton*, an exclusive group Christian Bainbridge was welcomed into, at least in part, were an eccentric lot. In her years of service, she’d grown accustomed to bizarre behavior. And become skilled at ignoring it.

On a table by the window sat a stack of books that hadn't been there when she cleaned the study yesterday. A band of sunlight waterfalled over them, glinting off the gilded script on the spines. Christian took his place behind the duke's desk as Raine moved forward like a pulley had drawn her. Brand new treasures, releasing nothing but the delicious scent of leather when she lifted one volume to her nose. No mold, no dust, no stained pages. Not yet. Her heart tripped. Books were her one indulgence, her grand passion in a life lacking any other. But they were costly and often out of reach.

As were most things she desired.

"I just finished the one on top. Austen. Two novels are included. Her last, sadly. You're welcome to it."

She streaked her finger along a groove in the cover, delighted but trying hard not to show it. "I couldn't possibly."

"Really? You couldn't possibly? Why not?"

Raine turned, a spike of impatience racing through her. A sentiment that had gotten her into trouble her entire bred-to-be-subservient-but-at-times-unable-to life. What she found was Christian Bainbridge's gaze centered on her, or more specifically, on her finger, which still lovingly caressed the spine of Jane Austen's final tome. His eyes were heated when they met hers; there was no way to hide it. She removed her hand from the book and tangled it in her apron to hold back the tremor.

The man affected her like no other.

She wondered suddenly, alarmingly, why she quite *liked* the way he made her feel. The way his attention put her on a pedestal she'd never inhabited. Made her *want* in a way she never had, skin tingling, mind whirring, heart thumping. She

felt alive. Swallowing hard, her throat clicked. “I cannot because a gentleman does not loan books to a servant in a household he is visiting. It’s simply not done.”

Christian tugged on a length of twine surrounding a stack of envelopes he’d taken in hand, his gaze sweeping the length of her. “Who says I’m a gentleman,” he whispered, his expression caught between professor and pirate.

She frowned and walked toward him, settling in the leather armchair situated before the desk. The same chair she’d huddled in as the duke offered her a reprieve from a dreadful situation, offered her a new life. A new life she must carefully guard. “This is a ridiculous conversation. You’re an esteemed guest of the Duke and Duchess of Devon, and I’m here to help you translate.” She pushed a breath past her lips. *We’re not on the same level, and we shouldn’t converse as if we were.* “I have one hour before I’m expected upstairs. Can we begin?”

“Of course, my apologies for any transgression. But know this.” He dropped his eyes, slid a letter free from the envelope, and ironed his palm across the sheet. “I’m the youngest son of a vicar who used God’s word most brutally. I was lucky enough to find my talent at an early age, a profitable talent, admittedly, and thank God for it because there was nothing else for me. I, too, have worked for everything I have; I’ve been given nothing. If you and I are going to spend time together, I simply wanted you to understand we’re not so far apart.” He sighed, his gaze touching hers before roaming to the window and that enticing stack of books. “As recompense for assisting with the translations, I thought it proper if you took the book. Any of them,” he added, dragging his hand through his hair, leaving it in charming spikes atop his head.

His distress, and his generosity, sent a jolt through her. Not many kind men populated her world. She drew a breath that smelled faintly of the duke but more of the man across from her. She knew, instantly, the difference—and which scent she preferred. “I suppose I could borrow it. The Austen. With its return, what’s the harm?” Shrugging, she curled her toes inside her worn slippers, letting the way her body sang in his presence capture every sense while vowing to deny it. “I love nothing more than reading.”

His head lifted, his smile blinding.

She was lost.

And vexed that he’d so easily won their first battle.



HE WAS LOST. CHARMED, INTRIGUED.

Relieved. To know the girl he’d been drawn to so intensely years ago was a woman worth knowing, worth loving. Worth fighting for, should the situation come to that, which it would. He wasn’t afraid to act on impulse—and he *always* trusted his gut. Like the swift decision to take the apprenticeship in Cambridge that had changed his life, Christian knew what he wanted.

And he wanted Raine Mowbray.

Her finger trailed across the page, a tiny, concentrating fold centered between her brows. Her nose was pert, her cheeks lightly freckled, her jaw sharp, used to being stubbornly set, he’d bet. Her hair, as golden as the butter he’d spread on his breakfast scone, fleeing the silly domestic’s

headpiece he'd love to yank from her head. She was slender. Delicate. As poised as any lady roaming any ballroom he'd ever been invited into. Whip-smart, when intelligent females who *admitted* being intelligent, were a rare commodity.

And, *ah*, was she beautiful.

She nibbled on her thumbnail and hummed beneath her breath, scribbling translations on a sheet of foolscap. Christian held back a groan—and the urge to tip her chin high and pour his frustration into a fiery kiss. His body was pulsing with the fantasy, every *inch* of it.

“Am I interrupting your work?” she asked without looking up, a subtle smile tilting the corners of her mouth.

He wasn't sure what he'd done to bring about amusement, but he'd go with it. They only had ten minutes left together, and Christian wanted Raine's conversation more than he wanted details on how to build a detached escapement caliber. And that was a first. “I'm sorry, I got distracted. Devon's watch repair may require a part I neglected to bring.”

Her long lashes lifted, revealing eyes he'd thought were brown but had turned out to be an enchanting shade of hazel. She hesitated before asking, “Did you truly turn down a knighthood?”

He opened his mouth, closed it. Ran his tongue over his teeth while searching for what he wanted to tell her. The truth was probably best. In any case, his cheeks flushed, saying it before he could.

“Heavens above, you did. You turned down a knighthood!”

The Prince Regent is cracked, Christian wanted to say. The watch in question was a piece of Austrian junk, not worth the expense or the bother. Annoyance, and a ragged little thread of

panic, almost drove out the pulse of desire controlling him. Raine would never find him suitable if she believed a meaningless knighthood stood between them. “It was a lark,” was all he came up with.

She tapped her quill pen against the desk, considering. “Did Prinny think the proposal a lark?”

He placed his tweezers on the desk, removed the loupe from its nestle against his eye. “What else have the chattering ninnies been saying?” Gossip had followed him his entire life because he presented such an intriguing subject, stuck as he was in that graceless spot between the aristocracy and everything below. A man of industry when men of industry weren’t revered.

Her smile broke, spreading across her face. So exquisite, it stole his breath. “Watches and wenchies,” she said through her glee.

A winding wheel dropped from his fingers and rolled across the desk, coming to a stop against the duke’s inkwell. “*What?*”

“All you care for, that is.”

His cheeks got so hot, they stung. “My work is my passion. I treasure this”—he gestured to the tools, the watch parts, spread across the desk—“more than, well...more than any...” *More than any wench. More than I could any woman except you, I’m coming to suspect.*

But that didn’t sound right *at all*. And she’d never believe him anyway.

Raine dropped her head, laughing softly. “I’m sorry. I’m being unkind. Teasing you when I should not dare to.”

Christian slumped back in his chair, uncertain where she was going with this. Women seldom admitted being unkind, especially when they were being unkind. “You are?”

“I don’t often get to converse in this manner.” She folded her arms along the desk and rested her chin atop them, giving him a candid perusal typically only circulated inside a bedchamber. “You see, clever conversation isn’t expected of a humble housemaid, isn’t requested or required. Just because I’m passive by necessity doesn’t mean I am in *life*.” Her lids fluttered with a sigh that almost had him reaching for her, which would be a mistake. He wanted to be her friend first. Needed to be her friend first. There was a reticence about her he feared had come from the debacle that had sent her fleeing from Tavistock House.

But Christian knew one thing. If he found out his cousin, a man he hadn’t talked to in ten years and barely knew, had touched Raine Mowbray against her will, he would kill him.

Calming himself, he picked up a winding wheel and flipped it between his fingers, better to have something to do with his hands than placing them on her person. “You can talk to me as I adore clever banter. I’ll not require but certainly request.”

Her gaze danced away from his. “I miss those conversations. I miss engaging my brain. My former employer, Countess Tavistock, let me attend lessons with her governess from the time I was in leading strings. Later, I acted as an informal tutor to her children in certain subjects. My education is lacking for a peer but advanced for a maid. Languages, reading, came easily.” Lost in thought, she chewed on her bottom lip, increasing his enchantment and his physical discomfort. “I think...I’m finding it easy to talk to you, which

should not be. Or rather, doesn't need to be for me to assist with your translations."

He slid his hand across the desk, unable to check the impulse. His heart had begun to thump, images of what he'd like to share with her—mind, body, soul—flooding him.

She was watching, wide-eyed but accepting, about to let him touch her.

"Kit, have I found the most unbelievable—" Penny burst into the room, took one look at the intimate scene, and bumped back against the door. "Sorry. I've interrupted."

"*Kit*," she mouthed with a grin that lit Christian up inside. Then she flipped one of the five watches on the desk over and viewed the time. "Oh, goodness, I have to go." Making a note on the letter to mark her place, she collected her papers in a tidy pile and laid the quill pen on top. "I'll be back tomorrow. Same time. I don't think it will take me more than three days, maybe four, to translate them. There are a few words I'm not sure of, colloquial speech, but the duchess has a German-language text in her materials for the children's lessons which may help."

Christian was out of his armchair like a shot and heading to the stack of books by the window. He knew Penny was watching the scene unfurl with undisguised interest, but Christian couldn't worry about that *and* deliver Jane Austen. A bit winded from his effort, he intercepted Raine at the door. "You forgot this," he murmured and pushed the volume into her hand. She wasn't wearing gloves, and neither was he, and his thumb brushed her wrist, a desperate, exhilarating feeling flowing up his arm and into his chest. And settling. "Please," he added when he'd never begged a woman for anything in his life. "We had a deal, remember?"

Her shoulder lifted, that ridiculous cap on her head bobbing as if she was going to refuse when her fingers closed gently around the book. Then she left him standing there, the sensation of touching her bare skin engraved on his senses like his name was engraved on his watches.

Penny stepped behind him, following his gaze down the deserted hallway, the only thing remaining Raine's teasing scent. That, and the images racing like feral dogs through his mind. Some of them lewd, he'd admit.

How soon could he make *that* reality, he wondered?

"That gorgeous creature is our bluestocking?" Penny asked in dazed incredulity. "Remind me to consider the brainy ones in the future."

"*My* bluestocking," Christian corrected.

Penny jammed his broad shoulder against the doorjamb. "So that's the way of it? Soft heart like yours, I knew it was coming at some point." He sighed, the sound genuinely mournful. "Well, now we're doomed."

Christian looked away before his face betrayed him. His severe upbringing and everything he'd had to do to succeed had beaten any sense of benevolence out of him.

He didn't have a soft heart. A generous heart.

Slightly more generous than Penny's perhaps.

But for the girl on the veranda, he was willing to expose his—even if he lost it in the process.

Three



Christian was waiting for her the next morning, lounging in the doorway of the duke's study like a panther stalking his prey. Teacup in hand, he took a leisurely sip and let his gaze roam the length of her and back. His calculated study was the most erotic thing she'd ever experienced—and all without being touched. She kept her expression placid, she hoped, as her chest flushed beneath starched cotton.

My, what would being kissed by the man, which she'd spent half the night contemplating, be like if his straightforward but pointed scrutiny scorched?

Most likely, it would be a disappointment, as the two careless kisses Raine had experienced to date had been.

“Are we ready to proceed with the project?” She halted before him, amazed her voice sounded steady with such wild anticipation seizing her. A stunned breath struck as she looked into his eyes and understood she felt much more than she should have. This was dreadful, an attraction between them a breach of an elemental tenet of servitude. A domestic did not, could not, foster feelings for a guest. A guest in a *ducal* home. A man notorious enough to be written about in the gossip sheets. A man known for his profligate lifestyle and his magnificent timepieces. A man well above her station.

A man who would break her heart into a thousand pieces if she let him.

He raised a dark eyebrow and sipped from his teacup. “Are you done?” he asked and turned to move into the study.

She tilted her head in question. “Done?”

“Your face, just then, was like one of my watches when I crack open the casing. A lot of moving parts.” His deep voice drew her into the room, where he added with a cunning look thrown over his shoulder, “I apprenticed with a very brilliant horologist who once told me, deliberation can arrest innovation.”

She settled in the armchair before the desk, her stack of translation materials where she’d left them the day before. Christian’s tools were perfectly placed, as well. A precise row, an exact arrangement from largest to smallest. Interesting. A conscientious man with the things he cared for. “Go with your gut. Is that what you were supposed to take from that charming bit of horological wisdom? For a man, I’m certain that’s excellent advice. Women are not often afforded the opportunity to rise to such a challenge, Mister Bainbridge.”

His burst of laughter had her glancing up from the letter she’d spread across glossy mahogany, another opportunity to dive into the blasted blue of his eyes. Another opportunity to note the wicked dimple denting his cheek. “Let’s agree,” he said, sliding a cup of tea across the desk when a man had never poured tea for her in her life, “that within the walls of Devon’s exhaustively regal study, you’re afforded every opportunity to rise to such a challenge.”

She pressed her lips together to hold back a smile. “So I’m to speak freely. And this benefits you how?”

Christian popped the loupe into place against his left eye, picked up a small screwdriver, and turned his attention to the metal parts spread before him. “That, Miss Mowbray, is still to be determined.”

The hour passed quickly, quietly, contentedly. There was an ease in being around Christian Bainbridge, which Raine understood was not customary or conventional. His regard warmed her, brief strikes when he stretched or took a sip of tea, that made her feel like a thick, woolen shawl had been placed about her shoulders rather than a sharp blade edged along her skin, as masculine attention usually brought. She was attractive, and men were weak. Indeed, her appearance was a drawback rather than a source of good fortune, as beauty was for a woman of highborn birth. Thinking of the times she’d had to push the scuffed bureau in front of the attic door at Tavistock House suddenly came to her, and she frowned. Placed her quill on the desk and leaned back in her chair to watch Christian work.

Five minutes at her leisure, she decided with a glance thrown at the mantel clock Christian had modified earlier, a device that had never before kept accurate time. Fascinated, she watched him adjust the wheel of a pocket watch, pause, then go in for another alteration.

“There’s nothing faulty with the piece. Just a loose hairspring.” One side of his mouth kicked up. “It’s aging, like skin that starts to sag. Springs lose their elasticity, as it were.”

“It’s lovely,” she murmured, unable to look away from the long, slim fingers manipulating the tool with true artistry. He was gifted. More talented than anyone she’d ever known. Foolish, to be this attracted to a man so far from her reach. To

be compelled to know him better, to share the scant, uninteresting bits of her life with him.

“A Bainbridge open-face duplex chronometer, to be precise.” He removed the loupe, leaving a shallow dent where it had pressed into this skin, and slid the watch across to her. “Take a look. It’s a superb model. Probably the one I’m best known for.”

“The most accurate,” she said and grasped the watch, the metal casing warm from his touch.

He tilted his head, his lips curving in pleasure. “The chattering ninnies included that bit, did they? Sometimes gossip is as precise as my timepieces.”

She rotated the watch, the silver filigree chain sliding through her fingers. “This is beautiful. I’ve never seen the like.”

“A silversmith in France makes them. Unique to my pieces.”

“Gorgeous,” she murmured.

“Yes.”

She stared at the watch, unable to meet his gaze, wondering what he wanted from her. Her intuition told her it wasn’t what most men of her acquaintance had. Or not all. There was hunger in his attention, yes, but there was also an affectionate, enveloping kindness that even his sardonic banter couldn’t quell. He was a better man than he believed if she had her guess. It frightened her that she was beginning to trust him, to understand, like his timepieces, what made him tick.

“There’s a spare length of chain, slightly damaged, that has no home.” He nudged a length of filigree into her line of vision. “It would make an excellent bookmark.”

She shook her head. “No more gifts, Mister Bainbridge.”

“There’ve been no gifts. Miss Austen is returning to me, is she not? And the filigree has no use, consider it rubbish.”

She blew out an exasperated breath. *Impossible man*, she reasoned and reached for the chain. It glimmered against her skin, a flawless fragment, not an imperfection in sight.

“Rise to the challenge in our safe space, Miss Mowbray. Tell me what’s circling through your astute mind.”

“I’d rather serve as a maid my whole life than be beholden to anyone,” she said in a rush, the words tense, hard, shaded by a forlorn past and an uncertain future. She thrust the delicate silver across the desk. “That’s what I’m thinking.”

Christian cursed softly beneath his breath.

She looked up, startled to see how stunned he seemed by her words. “Sorry you asked? An honest woman isn’t always welcome.”

“No, God, no. I want to hear anything you wish to tell me.” He scrubbed his hand over his face. The eyes that met hers were apologetic, beseeching, an indigo sea she wanted to plunge into. “I imagined it would be days before we got to this topic. You see, I’m a devotee of actions over words, and if I speak before you’ve had time to *see*, I’m not sure you’ll believe me. I hadn’t planned on this, on ever meeting you. Of course, I had things I wanted to say should it ever occur, but life never goes the way you plan, does it?”

Her heart stuttered in her chest. Could her intuition have deceived her this appallingly? Was he a devious man, after all? “You’ve been withholding something from me. Something I should know.”

His beautiful lips parted, closed, parted again. “No, yes, partially.”

“You’re betrothed,” she whispered and rose shakily to her feet, the notion sending a dart of grief through her. Grief she had no right to feel. No *place* to feel. How many times had she seen aristocratic men take advantage? Was she going to betray herself and fall prey as well? Over a man who had the most arresting voice she’d ever heard, the sweetest smile, the gentlest laugh? A man who was intelligent and cunning and even a little shy? A man who seemed to know her, who she seemed to know right back.

Was that what it took for her to fold? To fall?

Bracing his hands on the desk, he shoved from his chair, fury tightening his stubbled jaw. “If you think I would betray you in this manner after I’ve sat here for two days consuming you with my eyes, panting like a dog over a bone but holding my feelings inside for both of us, then there’s no chance. I’m a scoundrel, fine, admitted, but I don’t play with people’s happiness nor seek to increase their challenges. When I can see you’re challenged. And alone. But I’m alone, too, Raine. For years, *centuries*.” He yanked a hand that trembled through his hair and exhaled sharply. “This is coming out wrong. I’m not gifted in the art of sustaining relationships. Or fostering them.”

“Not according to the chattering ninnies,” she returned, realizing they were arguing. Although she had no idea about what. So what if he had a mistress? A fiancée? Or one of each. It should mean nothing to her. But, *oh*, it did.

“Bringing up the gossips rags? Really? The lady doesn’t fight fair.”

She leaned across the desk, closing in until the gray flecks in his eyes shot into view. “You’re mistaken. I’m not a lady. I’m a housemaid, and that’s all I’ll ever be. You’re here”—she held her hand high, then lowered it—“and I’m here.”

“I won’t let you evade this discussion that easily. As if the tiers of society mean a damned thing to me.” He grasped her hand, unfurled her clenched fist, and angrily dropped the length of chain into it. “As if they mean anything to you. I’d be very disheartened if they did.”

Miss Bruce’s high-pitched voice intruded, a strident call from the hallway.

Raine backed away from him, bumping into the armchair, her fingers closing around the filigree. “I have to go.”

“Meet me tonight. Ten o’clock. At the stone bridge over the pond. I’ve been walking every night to clear my mind. It’s quite lovely. And safe.” He held up his hands. “I won’t touch you. I’ll explain everything, though I’m sure I’ll muddle it up. Hopefully, I can figure out what to say between now and then.”

“The truth will do nicely.”

When Miss Bruce’s voice again flowed between them, he sighed and gave Raine a resigned wave toward the door. “That’s what we’ll go with then. I only ask for tolerance in advance. Men are, you must remember, simple, foolish creatures. We often stumble along doing the best we can.”

Raine strode from the study with Christian’s gaze stinging her back and his delicate filigree chain marking her palm, confused and agitated, thinking somewhat crossly that she’d never met a less simple, foolish creature in her life.



CHRISTIAN HADN'T BEEN LYING WHEN HE TOLD RAINE HE wasn't very good with women.

Success had brought them to his Berkeley Square doorstep in droves, and he knew, after diligent practice, how to satisfy. For a night, a week or two. A month. He was skilled in transitory pleasure; the mechanics of tugging weren't hard to perfect when one liked working parts and the microscopic details that accompanied them as much as he did. He was patient. Meticulous. Generous in bed, as his last mistress had shared with a level of surprise that let him know most men *weren't*. A fast pace had its time and place. As did a slow one.

He liked both and everything in between.

But he knew nothing, absolutely nothing, about quiet conversations over tea. Intimate discussions about family and politics and art while thoughts of making someone happy *out* of bed swirled through his mind. Thoughts about love filling his heart. He'd only loved two people, his brother and mother, and they were both long gone. Maybe three, if he counted Penny, which he felt he could in a brotherly, best friend fashion.

Moonlight slithered across the boundless woodlands as choppy pianoforte chords, compliments of a regrettably untalented Devon guest, flowed over him. Christian sighed and kicked at a patch of overgrown grass. Raine was late, likely not coming. Reading Austen in her narrow bed in the servant's quarters, tucked in and away from him. Or, maybe she'd taken the book and the length of entirely serviceable silver filigree he'd gifted her on a whim and shoved them

under his door, a determined rebuke. A mild breeze ripped through the pitch night, the temperature, for a Yorkshire evening, balmy and ideal. A perfect night for—

Christian halted, flipping the worn compensating balance wheel he'd replaced on one of the duke's watches from hand to hand. A perfect night for *what?*

Not an assignation.

As much as he wanted Raine beneath him on any available surface she'd agree to share, he wanted her friendship, her opinions, wishes, dreams, past, present, future, *more*. He wanted the one person in the universe he felt could ease his loneliness.

The one person he might have a chance to make happy in return. Why he imagined he could, he wasn't able to explain; he only knew it to be true.

The wheel tumbled from his hand to the grass. With a growl, he went to one knee to retrieve it. This was trouble, even if he welcomed it. Dire and unpredictable. He was in love with the woman in the duke's study, not only the girl he'd mooned over at his cousin's estate.

The sound of a branch cracking had his gaze reaching into the night, his body flooding with anticipation.

She was late. But she'd come.

Strolling across the lawn, that unflattering dress whipping her long legs, flaxen hair unbound and flowing down her back, something he'd yet to see. He clenched his hands into fists and rose unsteadily to his feet. This is how she'd look in his bed. A little untamed, a little unsure.

All *his*.

She appeared nervous when she reached him, her cheeks ashen in the creamy moonlight, her bottom lip tucked firmly between her teeth. Tugging at her threadbare shawl, she gave him a cautious smile, a tilt of her head that said, *I'm here, now what?*

He extended his hand, watched in trepidation as she glanced at the offering, caught her breath in indecision, then slowly linked her fingers with his. It was a sweetly intimate gesture, and he was unable to remember holding hands with anyone except his mother.

With a smile but no conversation, not yet, he tugged her along, over the stone bridge to a secluded spot on the other side of the stream. The plink of the pianoforte rippled through the night, the only sound aside from their hushed breaths and the distant chirp of crickets.

Penny, a romantic at heart though he'd deny it to his death, had secured the blanket and the candles. Christian had charmed the bottle of wine from the cook, Mrs. Webster, who certainly suspected he planned to use it for nefarious purposes, which for the first time, he didn't.

Raine moved ahead of him, halted, and he stumbled into her. *Bloody hell*, her body was warm, soft. He tucked his nose in her hair, his inhalation sending the scent of lavender through him.

"What's this?" she asked with a searching backward glance.

Christian gave her a gentle nudge away from his body before it provided proof of her ardent effect on him. "A moonlit picnic among friends. I'll sit on the far side of the blanket, not even the tip of my boot touching the hem of that most unflattering garment Devon has you wear. The candles

add a certain sense of propriety, am I right? With those and a close-to-full moon, we're as illuminated as we'd be in the duchess's drawing room. You see, I remember my promise."

A laugh burst from her, sending her shawl fluttering to the ground. "You think two tallow candles will style this a proper situation? Mister Bainbridge, I'm astounded by your lack of prudence and your optimism that the wind won't blow them out. Also, a gentleman never tells a woman her clothing is unflattering, even if it's the absolute truth."

He dropped to his haunches to retrieve her shawl and gestured to the candles that had defied his will and indeed remained unlit. "Go on. Please. You're ruining the most romantic undertaking of my life. And it's Christian. Not sir, not mister. I'm neither of those things, not to you."

"That's just as well," she said and wandered to his celebration beneath the stars, arranging herself on the blanket with all the grace of a queen, "because I prefer Kit."

He hummed beneath his breath, unsure what to say. His nickname on her lips sent a jagged, desirous pulse spiraling through him. Of longing. And strangely, of loneliness. No one aside from his brother and Penny had ever called him Kit. He wouldn't have allowed it if they had. The name brought too many painful memories, ones he'd sealed in a box and buried deep in his heart. This endeavor, he realized as he settled across from her, was going to test him.

Test that promise he'd so boldly made not to touch her.

Silent, he poured wine into the tumblers he'd guessed would make the trip more safely than wine glasses and handed her one. Rucking his knee high, he dropped his arm atop it and watched her tongue peek out to catch a drop of wine on the

rim. His fingers clamped around the crystal as his body tightened. God, looking and not touching was *torture*.

“I wish Lady Adam’s pianoforte skills were enhancing this enchanting summer evening, but alas, she’s quite horrible,” Raine murmured after taking an engrossed sip, as if she didn’t often get to taste wine. “If she starts singing, I may have to plug my ears.”

Her calm certainty about his honorable intent threw him off balance. “You’re not frightened to be out here with me?”

She paused, her gaze, black in the muted light, narrowing. “Should I be?”

He took a leisurely drink, then shook his head. “No.”

“You’re a gentleman. A *gentle* man. Known more for your reputation than the truth. I know the difference; I’ve encountered the difference.”

Imagining how she knew sent a jolt of anger through him. “Your beauty is tempting, but your mind even more so.”

“Beauty is fleeting. And no man has ever taken the time to know my mind.”

He blew out a breath, frustrated with himself. And her. “You effectively paint me in a corner when I’m not even sure it’s your intention. I’ve never had a partner verbally joust and outman me so well. Or so easily.”

That charming little dent pinged between her brows as she frowned. “What do you mean?”

“That I unhappily join the ranks of the fleeting and frail. Because I, too, find you incredibly beautiful. My captivation started when I had little notion what was in your mind, just like those toffs you describe with disdain,” he admitted,

forging ahead despite her obvious shock. “I only knew you had a great love of books, nestled in the corner of the veranda night after night, lamplight flooding over you as you tuned the pages. I’d never wanted anything more than I did to hear your voice. And, I suppose, yes, to touch you. My only justification is that I was a fifteen-year-old fool.”

“Tavistock House,” she breathed.

He nodded with a long pull of his wine, wondering if he was going to be forced to chase her over the bridge and across the lawn if she decided to run. Because he *would* chase her. To the ends of the earth. She simply didn’t understand that yet—and he was just beginning to.

She placed the tumbler by her side and rose to her knees. “Who *are* you?”

“You’re waiting for me to lie, aren’t you? Maybe I should, but I won’t. The Earl of Tavistock is my cousin, a very distant relation. Even more distant in terms of our acquaintance. After my brother died, he was the last relative I had left. I spent three weeks with him one summer before I removed myself from his household for an apprenticeship in Cambridge. I was already on my future path, already had a reputation for repairing capricious timepieces.” Soothing a bout of nerves, he polished off the wine in his glass and reached for the bottle. “There was nothing for me at Tavistock House except the girl on the veranda, but I was in no position to fend for myself, to fight for more. I was a child still in many ways. Vulnerable in mind and heart from the previous months, losing my family. The earl was horrid. Belittling. Callous.” He paused, the idea of his cousin touching Raine blackening his vision at the edges. “Which I fear you already know.”

Her gaze lifted to roam the woodlands, the lawn, the bridge. Anywhere but on him. “That’s why you seemed familiar. How you knew about the books.”

“Yes.”

Through moonlight the color of a tarnished coin, her gaze found his. “Why didn’t you talk to me? Your bedchamber must have overlooked the veranda, and I went there every night. Mainly to escape the earl. He would come to the attic and select a maid, willing or not, it didn’t matter. Not every night. Or even every week when he was in residence. You never knew, just heard his footfalls on the stairs. At that time, I was young enough, fourteen maybe, to escape his attention and my father was the head gardener, my mother his housekeeper, so—”

“I may not be able to hear this,” he said between clenched teeth.

Her blinding smile, a most contrary reaction, rocked him where he sat. “Oh, no, Kit, he never...” She pressed the tumbler against her cheek as if it could cool her skin, then sighed and took another drink.

He wanted to tell her to slow down or risk becoming tipsy, but he said nothing, just sat there consumed with relief that his cousin had never gotten his filthy hands on her.

“My brother is friendly with Thomas Kingsman, the Duke of Devon’s footman,” she said after a charged moment of silence. “He spoke to the duke, who offered to pension me off, of sorts, from your cousin. He said my language skills were needed, his governess not equipped. Tavistock was deeply in debt, reducing his staff, so his attraction to me meant much less than the coin in his pocket and one less mouth to feed. All this delicacy, instead of my up and leaving in the middle of the

night, was done so my father and mother could remain at Tavistock House until they are ready to retire, possibly with a modest cottage retained on one of his country estates. The countess is quite lovely, and my parent's positions lofty enough to make her home a fine place to live, the earl notwithstanding."

"I could kill him for making you feel like you had to run away, for making you leave your family. For making me flee to Cambridge, alone in the world with a hardened heart."

Raine stilled, placing her tumbler on the grass. Leaning on an outstretched arm, she brought her face close to his, her body moving in until Christian caught the scent of her skin, her clothing, her hair. Starch, lavender, lemons. *Raine*. Mixing with the teasing aroma of a country summer, bringing his blood to a boil. "I wish you'd talked to me. Let me know you were up there watching." She pressed her lips together, her lids lowering, teasing him, teasing them both. She had power over him, and he wondered if she was becoming courageous enough to use it.

"Don't," he warned, "not now. Not yet."

Why, she mouthed, breathless, as affected by him as he was by her.

If he had to do so little to convince her, they were both lost.

He shifted out of reach, an awkward move when he wasn't an awkward man. "Because I'm afraid kisses are all you'll give me. All you think we're suited for. And then you'll use them as proof that it's all I want."

"You engineered this"—she gestured to the wine, the moonlight—"and you're not even going to kiss me?"

“I feel caught,” he said, stumbling. Then he went ahead and told her, making a fool of himself. “You know I want to. Since the first moment I saw you ten years ago when I didn’t even know how to kiss! That would not have been pleasant, for you anyway.”

She laughed and reached, catching his jaw, her thumb sweeping over his cheek and drawing every bit of air from his lungs. “It would have been wonderful and very sweet if you’d tried, because I didn’t know how to then, either.”

“Now, you do.”

“Don’t get cross, Kit Bainbridge. Not with your unsavory antics. I’ve been kissed twice. Both disappointments.” She went to lower her hand, but he placed his over hers, trapping it against his cheek. “Honestly, one was acceptable. Boring but acceptable.”

“I feel challenged because I’ve never been boring.” He dipped his head, pressed a soft, searching kiss to her wrist. “I believe in accurate timepieces. Tepid summer nights and blueberry scones and first-rate Scotch. Tangled sheets and damp skin. Bottomless kisses.” She made a low purring sound and leaned in, her lids fluttering. He waited until she opened her eyes before he continued, “I believe you can meet someone and *know*. I always have. The girl on the veranda is why no one has been able to touch my heart. I’ve been waiting for her, for *you*, my entire life.”

She didn’t stop him when he tunneled his hand through her hair to circle the nape of her neck. Didn’t stop him when he went to his knees and fit her against him, chest to chest, hip to hip, capturing her mouth beneath his. Didn’t stop him when he tilted her head, kissing her more soulfully, giving more of himself than he’d ever given. Didn’t stop him when he palmed

her waist and pulled her in, letting her know in graphic detail exactly what she was doing to him.

Her lips were soft, her sighs sweet, her skin moist, her body perfect. Her arms rose to circle his shoulders and bring them closer, like hot wax on parchment, a seductive, molten press.

Following timelines and building trust and maintaining control slipped away. He let his lips slide to her cheek, her jaw, a sensitive spot beneath her ear as she released a heavy breath against his neck.

Dutifully, he would record everything she liked, every little thing.

Starting now.

“You’re *mine*,” he whispered, his voice sounding like it had been cut with jagged glass.

And that’s when she stopped him.

Rocking back off her kneeling pose, she broke his hold, landing on her bottom in the middle of the blanket.

He blinked, dazed, shaking his head as if the movement would return thought. “I’m sorry, I lost control. I don’t know what happened. I swear, I only wanted to talk to you, get to know you better and admit seeing you years ago, an admission that had started to feel like a betrayal of our fledgling friendship.”

She pressed her palm to her brow. “You don’t have to be sorry. I wanted you to kiss me. It was everything I imagined it would be. I didn’t push you away because I didn’t like it. I liked it *too* much.”

The hot lick of temper that had gotten him in trouble many, many times rolled through him. He wasn't practiced at accepting things he didn't want to hear. "This was a delicious taste, a glorious start. There's much more, Raine, and God do I want more, but why do I have the feeling you're going to tell me that can't happen?"

She jerked her head up, her own temper sparking. "Because it can't! There's a pleasant young man on staff. Nash. A groom with a promising future, someone who occupies *my* world, Kit, someone who has intimidated—"

"Oh, no, Raine Mowbray." He grasped her wrist, giving her a gentle shake. "If you're marrying anyone in this lifetime, it's bloody well going to be me. I claimed the right ten years ago, even if you didn't know it. Even if I didn't fully know it. The thousand dreams I've had about you since then confirm the decision, make no mistake."

Her eyes widened, her cheeks leeching color until he feared she would swoon. Then they filled with rosy-red fury. "Marriage? Should I have you admitted to Bedlam? I'm a housemaid, and you were just offered a knighthood! A union with me would be preposterous to consider when you could climb so much higher. You have patrons who would drop you and your accurate timepieces before you took your first matrimonial breath."

He settled back on his heels, releasing her as if her skin had scorched his hands. "What did you think I was doing out here with you?"

Guilt raced across her face, and he realized what she'd thought: that he was toying with her as she'd been toying with him. His chest constricted, and he closed his eyes to fend off the crimson haze. To her, he was just another feckless

aristocrat when in truth, he'd never fit anywhere except his lonely crevice. A crevice it seemed he was never to crawl from.

When he'd imagined creating his own universe with her in it.

A Latin phrase he recalled from school rolled through his mind. *Contra mundum*. Against the world. He'd wanted his future to be the two of them against the world.

“Go inside, Miss Mowbray. Before I say something I'll regret. I have a lamentable disposition that's landed me in more than one brawl. Ask Penny if you need proof.” He grabbed the bottle and lifted it to his lips, the taste of wine washing away the taste of *her*.

“I've hurt your feelings,” she said, her voice cracking. “Kit, I would never...that is, I...”

“Mister Bainbridge, if you don't mind. Sir works, too.” He sprawled to his back, his arm going over his eyes to hide whatever might lie in their depths. He wasn't accomplished at hiding his emotions, as those many scuffles Penny had rescued him from attested to. Raine witnessing his dismantling would serve no further purpose; her rejection was already stripping him bare. “Leave me to my plans to climb higher in society by means of an advantageous but loveless marriage. My plans to seduce a maid beneath a”—he shifted his arm and stared at the tree above them—“towering elm.”

She muttered something he didn't catch, then said clearly, “I'll leave as you're not willing to discuss this rationally, when you know I'm right. I wish I *weren't* right, do you not know that? I'm sorry, I would never do anything to hurt you. We're becoming friends, and I've never had many of those.” She sounded close to tears, and he felt close to them.

He heard her rise, shake out her skirt, hesitate, when he wanted, suddenly and desperately, to be alone. “It looks like I’m going to have a lot of time to devote to creating a detached escapement caliber, and I need you and your German, Miss Mowbray, so don’t think about wheedling out of finishing the translations for me.”

There. Well done. If he made her mad, she’d bolt.

Women tended to do that; he tended to make them.

She cursed beneath her breath, a most unladylike sentiment, and stalked away, the sound of her footfalls lessening until halting pianoforte notes and a chorus of bleating crickets were all that surrounded him.

He was going to finish the bottle of wine and slumber beneath the stars. Stagger into Devon’s agreeable abode at dawn and sleep until supper. Let the entire household think him a mad artiste because perhaps he was. Penny could make excuses for him *and* supervise the translations, while Christian spent the rest of the week repairing the duke’s timepieces in seclusion.

Then he would bolt for London himself.

Because his heart was breaking.

Raine didn’t believe that love could happen instantaneously. Intuition or fate or destiny, whatever one wanted to call it.

And there was nothing he could do to *make* her believe.

Like the nick of a blade against tender skin, his dilemma was painful but uncomplicated.

For years, he’d loved someone who, when given a chance, wasn’t willing to love him back.

Four



Raine huddled beneath the starched sheet in her attic bed, tugged a counterpane of higher quality than Tavistock had ever provided for his staff to her chin. Moonbeams, the same that had tumbled over Kit so generously an hour ago, poured in the small window, highlighting the dust motes drifting through the air and the despair filling her heart.

He might not talk to her again, except for his bleeding translations, a project she'd been dragging out to spend more time with him. What if he woke at dawn and decided to return to London? What if he woke at dawn and decided wenches were much less trouble than obstinate housemaids?

She sighed and touched her lips, still tingling from his kiss. Wasn't that what she'd *told* him to do? Leave her to an independent future, a footman who may or may not ask for her hand. A man she considered a friend but nothing more. A man who'd given her nothing more than a tiresome kiss.

She didn't want to live the rest of her life with tiresome kisses.

Not when there were ones powerful enough to melt copper if she only dared to accept them.

She closed her eyes and swallowed against the sting of tears. The hurt in his gaze had pierced something deep within

her.

He was going to be doubly mad that she'd alerted his valet—who looked like no valet Raine had ever seen—to his possibly drunken state out there on the edge of the parklands. Where foxes and grass snakes and she wasn't sure what else roamed at night. Maybe it wasn't safe. Maybe he would get cold. The clouds had looked tempestuous like a storm might be rolling in. And...

Damn and blast. This felt like what she'd imagined falling in love would. Astonishing and distressing. Like stripping naked and diving into a calm pond. Glorious, until you looked to the shore and realized you weren't alone and everyone was watching.

Kit might love her, too. Or imagine he did. That timid girl had made an enormous impression on him. Hard to believe when she'd been so lonely and fearful. But he'd been lonely and fearful, too. Like recognized like. It made her breath catch to imagine that brilliant boy gazing down from his window above and wishing he had the courage to talk to her.

Something he'd said when he met her shimmered through her mind.

So easy, and yet, ten years overdue.

A tear rolled down her cheek, and she scrubbed it away. His odd comment now made all the sense in the world.

If she tried, she could almost picture him. She remembered a young man visiting that summer. Quality clothing covering a gangly body, one in the midst of splendid promise. Beautiful features too big for his face.

Of course, he'd grown into them, into everything, beautifully. Become a gorgeous, talented, thoughtful man. A

man suited to a highborn lady, someone who would add every advantage to his life, to his business. Even in Raine's class, marriage was rarely about love and often about necessity or accessibility, property, or monies. She'd never expected love.

When Kit expected *everything*.

She snuggled deeper in the bed, her toes chilled, her skin clammy. There were a thousand reasons for her to push Kit away and only one reason not to. If she let herself love him, and someday he regretted his choice, as she assumed he would, she'd curl into a ball and die. Simply die. A marriage of convenience was one thing, but a marriage where only one person was happy...where only one person was in love...

Better to be alone than suffer such torment.

She pressed her face into her pillow, deciding to take the coward's path.



CHRISTIAN FELT THE TIP OF A BOOT NUDGE HIS HIP. AT THE third nudge, he snarled, "Leave me be, will you? I'll head back to the house with the sun. Go away."

"You're a disaster. I can't take you anywhere." Penny dropped to his haunches beside Christian and seized the empty wine bottle with a groan of dismay. "I was afraid of this. Women aren't clocks. Nothing reliable about them."

"I tried, can't you see? Romance. It didn't work."

"Perhaps the traditional approach would be better. In London better. Rides through Hyde Park, strolls along Bond Street, two scandalous waltzes in one night, done. Marriage to

someone who means something but not everything. Everything is not required, Kit.”

“It is for me.” Christian elbowed to a wobbly sit. A gust of wind whipped in from the east, sending his hair into his eyes. A storm was brewing. He rubbed his aching chest; his argument with Raine had taken a piece of him and shattered it like china against marble. He didn’t feel whole at the moment.

Penny sat next to Christian, stretching his legs out across the wrinkled blanket. “I feared this.”

“Wonderful, add prophecy to your list of talents. Have your flask handy?”

Penny grimaced and yanked the dented tin from his coat pocket, thrust it toward Christian. The etched metal caught a streak of moonlight and sent it shooting across their Hessians.

Christian took a long pull, the Scotch adding weight to the wine he’d consumed in a way he knew would distress him come morning. “She’s not going for it,” he said with a sinking heart. Even with that scorching kiss standing between them, she hadn’t considered it. Or him.

Penny’s blistering gaze swept him, the judgmental cur. “Did you mention marriage?”

“I did,” Christian said with another drink, “and she’s out.”

“Maybe we rehearse, and you can try again. You’re not the best with these things. Remember what you said to Lady Leadbetter about her gown? She stills get pink in the face when we see her.”

“I thought she’d accidentally dressed for a costume ball, I honestly did!” He coughed and shoved the flask in Penny’s direction. “Did you see that silk catastrophe? I was trying to save her from embarrassment. ‘Go home and change before

anyone sees you' type of thing. You dressed for the wrong event."

"What I'm hearing is that you applied your standard finesse to the proposal tonight."

"It wasn't poetic if that's what you're asking."

Penny took a drink and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Ah, I've read this play before. You bumble, then Miss Mowbray says something you don't want to hear, and boom, a sulking, insolent man appears, stage left."

Christian stacked one boot atop the other and hung his head back, his gaze going to a sky that looked like it was going to unleash havoc at any moment. "A congenial groom got to her first. Someone by the name of Dash or something. Certainly the more appropriate choice. Another maid told her about that knighthood offer from cracked George, so she believes we're leagues apart. If she only knew what it was like growing up with a wastrel for a father, a revered vicar the entire household was terrified of. My upbringing was less than noble. Likely less noble than hers in many respects."

"So she declined because of societal disparity and this illustrious groom..."

"Then I got angry, and that sulking, insolent bloke you mentioned joined the party. It wasn't pretty."

"Your temper is truly your downfall." Penny polished the flask on his sleeve and slipped it in his pocket. "We're lost if we can't upstage a humble groom, however."

"It's more complicated than that." He groaned, digging his heel in the soil. His cheeks had gotten hot, always a bad sign. "Remember that girl I fancied? The one at Tavistock House?"

Penny whistled beneath his breath, tilted his head in meditation. “The paragon on the veranda. Yes, I remember, because you bring her up every time we’re deep in our cups. She’s mysteriously ruined every relationship you’ve tried to sustain, if I may be so bold as to judge. Let me guess, she’s in your head along with your lovely bluestocking and you don’t know—”

“She *is* my lovely bluestocking.”

Christian held back a grin as shock whipped across Penny’s impossible-to-alter countenance. At least he was getting *some* joy from this dreadful experience.

“Well...” Penny rummaged in his pocket for the flask, apparently deciding another chug was in order. “Consider me stunned.” He issued a humorless grunt, his gaze locking with Christian’s then dancing away. Penny was his best friend in the world, but discussing emotions was hard for men. God knows what tender sentiment was shining in Christian’s eyes. “Almost gives me a chill along my spine. I don’t believe in fate or fanciful events, or love, but damn, that’s incredible. Are you sure?”

Christian nodded. He was sure.

“Then you must make her understand. All these years. She’s your...she’s the...”

“You’re going to have to finish the translations.”

Penny crawled to his feet with a curse. “I’m the best soldier-cum-manservant in England, and I’m dutiful, but I’m not crazy. And I’m *not* sitting in that stifling, regally-oppressive room with a vexed woman you inelegantly asked to marry you.” He collected the edge of the blanket in his fist as raindrops began to strike the ground, yanking it from

underneath Christian. “I’m scared of angry women. And tired of dealing with yours. This is your dilemma to solve, my friend.” Grabbing the candles, he stuffed them under his armpits, and kicked the wine bottle in the bushes. “If you can look her in the eye and tell her you don’t want her, if you mean it, then I’ll pack up our gadgets and tools, and we ride back to London. If you can’t, maybe your job’s not done. And I don’t just mean the watches. I guess I’m asking you to stop and think and not let your temper lead.”

“Feels hopeless,” Christian said and rose unsteadily to his feet, the rain coming down hard, soaking his clothing and sending tiny rivulets of water into his eyes.

Penny took off across the bridge, throwing over his shoulder, “That’s the liquor talking.” He halted on the rise, just before he dipped down on the other side, lost from sight. “And she cares. At least a little. How do you think I found you? Your lovely bluestocking was worried about you out here in the wild, three hundred feet from a ducal manor, which I didn’t point out. Came to get me. To get *you*.”

Christian sank back against the bridge’s pillar, his mind awhirl. Thunder rumbled in the distance, but he barely acknowledged it. It would serve him right, getting struck during a fit of masculine pique.

Raine cared about him.

She’d almost admitted that. Not wanting to hurt someone equaled caring, didn’t it? Her kiss, while untutored and endearingly guileless, spoke of attraction. And curiosity. Which could lead to love. With their tempers, he expected a lifetime of senseless arguments and fierce lovemaking.

She was everything he’d dreamed of. Clever, perhaps too much so. Beautiful and serious-minded. Attentive. Kind.

Unconventional in the most enchanting way. He didn't care that she hadn't been born a lady. He simply didn't *care*. He'd never wanted anyone else, not ever. Had been in love with her since the first moment he noticed her sitting beneath a dusky summer moon, even if no one—except, incredibly, Penny—believed it.

He would find a way to make her forget about that ridiculous knighthood.

About her enthusiastic groom.

He would find a way to make her choose *him*.

Five



Christian was late for the morning's translation session.

Penny had overslept, which meant he'd overslept. There'd been no time for anything but a quick freshening up with tepid water from the washbasin and a guzzled cup of lukewarm tea. He was unshaven, cravat askew, waistcoat buttons, he noted as he looked down upon entering the duke's study, misbuttoned. He'd decided to forego his coat and had his sleeves rolled to his elbows. He wasn't going to play the part of the supposed aristocrat Raine had turned down—because his tailor *was* the best in London, and it showed in his attire—when the real Christian Bainbridge was an informal man.

He would be himself with his bluestocking and see how *that* went.

She was there, dependable to a fault, settled in the massive armchair that swallowed her petite frame, head bent, glorious hair stuffed in that horrid cap. After they crawled from bed the morning after their marriage, his second duty was going to be tossing those pathetic pieces of cotton and lace in the hearth. His first being making love to her until neither of them could see straight. He gave a mental sigh and made himself circle her to the desk. He had no reason to touch her even if his

fingertips tingled with the temptation, his stomach twisting with the *need*. He'd dreamed about her most of the night, their kiss lingering on his lips like mist on the moors.

As he collapsed in the duke's chair, his fingers stumbled over his waistcoat buttons, a quick repair when there was no way to hide the shape he was in.

Raine glanced up from her folio, took him in with one of those penetrating reviews that set his skin aflame, her lips lifting in a wry smile she didn't try to conceal. With a slight shake of her head, she pushed a teacup across the desk, then returned to her work.

The tea was blessedly hot, strong, no milk, one sugar. Just as he liked it. This trivial thoughtfulness combined with the rosy tinge lighting her cheeks eased the spiral of tension in his belly. She wasn't unaffected by him *or* his graceless proposal.

It was a start.

He popped his loupe in place, collected his tools, and dove into his work, content to be with her amidst a most companionable silence. The Duke of Devon had proven to be an excellent client over the years, his watches all coming from Christian's shop. The one he worked on now was a particular favorite, a piece Christian had relinquished with what felt like despair, the substantial blunt in his pocket not enough to ease the pain of surrendering his design. Perhaps making him an artist if not an able businessman.

Christian smoothed his finger over the etchings on the sterling silver case, the whirring wheels, the coiled hairsprings. Clicking and spinning in a flawless tempo, with maintenance able to provide the most reliable part of the duke's day for the rest of his life. His son's life. Christian's timepieces would live

far beyond him, a notion which gratified whenever he imagined it.

The heat of Raine's regard hit him, and he looked up in time to see her green-gold eyes focused on his hands, the flushed streaks beneath her cheeks etched in deeper than before, her face glowing in the muted illumination flowing in the window. The sounds of an awakening house vanished as their gazes locked, the scent of tea and books and ink beaten down beneath the weight of his longing, his desire to climb across the desk and finish what they'd started the night before.

His chest constricted, his body tightening.

The quill pen slipped from her fingers to the Aubusson rug beneath her feet. She must have felt it, too.

He rose, intent on rounding the desk and convincing her in a way he suspected he easily could when the notion came to him. With a secreted smile, he settled back in his chair. His joy knew no bounds.

Because he'd stumbled across the key to unlocking Raine Mowbray's sealed heart.

Christian was used to employing stubborn persuasion—used to getting his way. Used to convoluted business negotiations, and in some instances, convoluted personal ones. He called the shots and expected to prevail while playing by his rules. Raine was used to none of this. A housemaid had limited opportunities to express an opinion. Little freedom to *choose*. Like they'd agreed at the beginning of this journey, within these four walls, he would be her friend first. Let her drive the carriage. A gift he'd guarantee no one had ever given her.

A gift he'd never given.

He flexed his fingers and held back a grin as she fidgeted as surely as if he'd trailed his lips over her skin. "Would you like to see the inner workings?" He gestured to the watch. God above, she should imagine he meant something else.

His body throbbed at the thought.

When, of course, he meant something else.

But he was willing to ride this out and show her the bloody watch.

Pushing aside the letter she was transcribing, she rested her elbows on the desk and leaned in, her simple, elegant scent skimming his senses. Soap and rosewater and the lightest hint of lemon, free of conceit or enticement, like the woman. Her eyes lifted to his, then dropped to the timepiece. "It's exquisite," she murmured and went to touch, then halted, thinking better of the impulse.

He smiled, rooted to the spot, his love for her confirmed that second if it hadn't been already. "Here." He took her hand, extended her index finger, and lightly touched the watch, letting her feel the whisper-kiss movement of the wheels against her skin. "Nickel motor barrel bridge. Winding wheel. Crown wheel. Regulator. Escapement wheel." With each item he listed, he tapped her finger gently on the part.

"This timepiece will be in the duke's possession, his family's, for centuries. He'll likely gift it to Lord Jonathan. Perhaps another to Lord William. And they will gift them to their sons. Or, one can hope, to their daughters."

Christian's heart skipped, a full second before it kicked into rhythm again. He exhaled, his hand trembling where it rested over hers. "That knowledge gives me such pleasure, such pride, that it makes it easier to let them go."

She sighed, a low, melodic echo he would hold in his memory forever when he'd once wondered so savagely what her voice sounded like. Snaking her hand from beneath his, she said, "You're possessive."

He knew they weren't talking about his watches. "I've had to fight for everything I have, and I do mean everything, Raine. I don't easily share. Or give up."

"Is that a challenge?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Is it?"

"Stubborn," she added, humor chasing the declaration.

Taking his teacup with him, he sprawled in his armchair, his gaze locked on hers as he sipped. "Flaws aplenty."

"Kit, you're brilliant. And irritated only because I didn't tell you what you wanted to hear."

He rolled the rim of the cup along his bottom lip and felt intense satisfaction when her gaze tracked the movement. "You're the most forthright person I've ever met. It's strangely humbling. And punitive."

She laughed, such a joyous reaction he jostled his cup, spilling tea on his wrist. "I like talking to you. It's been ages, forever, I think, since I could speak my mind or anyone cared to listen. It's addictive. Like I feel when I'm close to figuring out the mystery in a book. I'm so ready to get there."

"You're killing me. You know that, right?" He blew a fast breath through his teeth, slapped his cup to the desk, and leaned in until he got close enough to see the flecks of gold swimming in her eyes. His body was alive with yearning, absolutely pulsing. "I'm happy to feed your compulsion. Any of them. Try me."

Her eyes widened, her lips parting on a spent, ragged sound that tore him up inside. “You don’t know me well.” She drew her hands into a prayerful fist and rested her chin atop them. “I’m headstrong. A horrible cook. An abysmal seamstress. My only talent languages, words, books. I’m independent and outspoken, a nightmare for most men. No one you would truly want to involve yourself with. I’m uninterested in parties or fashion or gossip. I’m happy with my novels. A cat would be nice. A dog even. A horse. And children.” Her eyes flicked to his, then to the desk. “Someday, children.”

He coughed to cover his mirth, but like smoke it slid neatly into the study, surrounding them.

“Why are you *smiling*, you beast?” she asked between bared teeth. “You know, I used to punch my brothers for teasing me like this.”

“Because this diatribe is enlightening as all hell, Raine darling. You’re talking yourself out of this, out of me, because you know I’ve already decided. I decided ten years ago. Somehow, this rambling list of excuses about why I shouldn’t want you is very, very good news. In the few hours between last night and this morning, you’ve decided we’re a ‘maybe’.” He snapped his fingers with a grin. “My horse has moved up in the odds.”

“I haven’t...that is, I am...I’m not...” With a growl of frustration, she shoved to her feet. “Oh, bother!”

He was out of his chair, catching her wrist before she could storm from the room. Walking her back against the door, he used her body to close it with a soft snap. “I’m going to say this once, then we’ll sit, have tea, and finish my translations. No more teasing, no more verbal fencing. I’ll not address the

issue again unless you want me to.” He leaned and whispered in her ear, “You’re in control, Miss Mowbray, how does that feel?”

Her shoulders rose and fell on a hushed breath, her arm quivering in his hold. “You know how it feels. In a world built for men, it feels wonderful.”

He braced his hand against the door, palm flat, fingers spread. He wanted to be steady—and he wanted her to listen. “I’m in love with you, Raine. My first and only love.” When she went to lower her gaze, he tipped her chin high with his free hand. He’d never realized how much taller he was, how slim and delicate she was. He felt empowered and frightened by his depth of feeling. To protect, to possess. “Penny told me if I could look you in the eye and tell you I didn’t want you, I was on the right path. I could leave Hartland Abbey and never look back. Well, I obviously can’t do that. And I won’t leave without knowing I told you everything that’s in my heart and my mind. A silly misunderstanding is not going to be the reason you run from me.” He smoothed his thumb over her bottom lip as she blinked, fighting, he could see, the impulse to look away. “My father was a harsh taskmaster. Cruel. My mother tried to assuage his temper, which made for a most miserable existence. Walking on broken bits of china, always. Cholera decimated our village when I was fifteen, and within two weeks, I had no one. My beloved brother, who’d hoped to go into business with me, gone. My mother, everyone, gone.”

Tears sparked her eyes. “Kit, you don’t have to tell me this.”

“Oh, yes, I do. I absolutely do. You said we don’t know each other well, so here I am. Like my tools, laid out on the duke’s desk, ready for inspection.” He curled his fingers into a

fist against the door. “Tavistock House was a desperate destination, though I had nowhere else to go. The earl not far from my father in temperament, unfortunately, which I could no longer countenance. I knew within three days of arrival that I couldn’t stay. He was wretched and...I loathed him almost as much as I feared him. I’d been offered an apprenticeship with a watchmaker, one I decided to accept without delay.” Laughing, he pressed a playful kiss to her cheek. “Then, I saw you. The very night I sent the note to Cambridge announcing my plans to arrive, there you were. In that darkened corner, bathed in moonlight, pressing a book against the globe of an oil lamp. I was like a butterfly caught in a net, immediate entrapment. Visceral. Gut-deep. Final. You must believe me. I beg you to believe me when I say I knew in one second that you were the only woman for me. It sounds like something out of a fairy tale, but it was true for me.”

She slipped her hand over his lips, but he simply kissed her palm, this caress not playful, bringing a needy sound from her that shocked them both.

Drawing her fingers to cup his cheek, he leaned in until his lips grazed hers. “I didn’t have the courage to stumble down the marble staircase at Tavistock House and introduce myself to the girl on the veranda. So I’ll do that now. Christian Emory Bainbridge, pleased to make your acquaintance. Now that that’s over, will you please marry me?” Then he slanted his head, his lips covering hers, taking possession, branding her as she’d branded him on a lonely night ten years ago.

Tunneling her fingers in his hair, she gave the strands a tug, her nails gently scraping his scalp. Touched her tongue to his and shyly began an erotic dance. Stepping between her legs, fitting himself as close to her as he could while standing, he murmured an approving hum that mixed with another of

those enchanting sounds she freed when she liked what he was doing.

He would enjoy learning what she desired. Needed. *Loved*. What made her heart race, her skin flush. Like his watches, he'd study her until he could disassemble the unique pieces of her to find the glorious, perfect fit.

He'd spend a lifetime making sure happiness and pleasure were never far from reach.

Predictably, the door opened as they were losing themselves in each other, sending Raine stumbling into Christian. Penny peered around the open space, one brow rising, a trick he'd perfected in his chipped mirror until he had it down, only putting in the effort because women appreciated it and invited him into their beds that much quicker.

Penny took them in with a flat smile, snorting as Raine danced away from Christian.

She straightened her sad mobcap, smoothed her dress, and tugged on her apron before throwing up her hands in mortification and slithering through the doorway without a backward glance.

Penny shoved Christian back a step when he tried to follow. "Get a grip on yourself, man. I don't know what's happening in that usually gifted brain of yours, but if you don't want to ruin her position in this household, ruin your relationship with Devon, you should let your able manservant assist with this scandalous post-encounter as you look like you've been dipped in something sticky and are not yet dry. And she looked about the same."

Christian muttered an oath and yanked his hand through his hair. "I asked her again, much better this proposal,

romantic even, and then there you were, barreling in.” He brought his knuckle to his mouth, winced. “Cut my lip on her tooth when she bumped into me. Your timing is impeccable, Mister Pennington, utterly impeccable.”

“At your service, sire.” Penny gave Christian’s cravat a rectifying yank. “You didn’t allow for much time between proposals. A tad desperate, isn’t it?” He yawned, stretched his shoulders like he’d just woken from a nap. “You think she’ll accept?”

Slapping Penny’s hand away, he growled, “How should I know?”

His valet’s brow rose, that odious trick again. “You couldn’t tell from the kiss? My, you *are* losing your touch.” He released a sardonic smile and leaned lazily against the doorjamb. “At least marriage means I won’t have to deliver any more necklaces to departing mistresses. No joy in that task. Remember that crazy countess who pulled the pistol on me? Can only be thankful she had no idea how to use it.” He crossed the room and collapsed in the chair Raine had recently vacated, gave the air a little sniff as if it still smelled of feminine delight. “I’ve had enough of enraged women to last a lifetime. For my sake, I’m hoping the bluestocking says yes.”

Christian strode to the window, braced his forearm on the ledge, and let his mind sink into their kiss. They’d been entangled, the scent of her storming his mind, the touch and taste of her devastating his body. His soul. When her eyes had opened for one brief moment and caught his, he’d seen something authentic and profound shimmering in their golden depths.

Christian gazed across the duke’s sloping lawn, clouds the color of pewter releasing scant light, the evergreens and

hedges coated in a blustery mist. “She’s going to say yes.”

“Again, let’s hope,” Penny murmured in a drowsy voice, “after you’ve made a cake of yourself. *Twice.*”

“She loves me, too.” *A little. I think.*

“So, it’s love. Couldn’t go for one of those advantageous but loveless marriages, could you? Not your style, I suppose.” The grunt his valet released sounded resigned and mournful. “Well, well, well, you’ve let yourself be caught, my friend. This should prove enlightening. To me, in any case. Ways I can avoid the trap.”

“I want to be caught,” Christian whispered too low for Penny to hear, realizing it was the sincerest statement he’d ever uttered.

He wanted, for the first time, to own and be owned. Wanted to give Raine everything she’d dreamed of while securing *his* dream.

For the girl on the veranda to finally be his.



RAINE DASHED DOWN THE HALLWAY, EMBARRASSED, overjoyed, panicked. Her body blazed like one of the kitchen’s ovens, throwing off heat until she feared anyone close to her would feel it. She skidded to a halt before she entered the main hall, Mrs. Webster’s smooth voice gliding from the pantry. The scent of baking bread and roasted meat joined the dusty air rolling in the open gallery windows, though when she lifted her hand to her nose, all Raine could smell on her skin was Kit. Sandalwood and the faint scent of bergamot that must be

in the soap he washed his hair with. She'd had her hand tangled in the dark strands, her lips open beneath his, their legs entwined like holly circling an elm trunk.

It had been, for one electrifying moment, what she imagined lovemaking was like.

Except, they'd been standing up.

Her face flamed, turning what she knew was an unbecoming shade of pink. Dear heaven, the man could kiss, quickly finding the way to unlock her passion. And, somehow, she'd seemed to know just how to follow along, his ragged sound of pleasure the most sensual thing she'd ever heard in her life. It had been natural, touching him, body melting against his, hands clutching to bring him closer.

When it had been impossible to get closer.

I love him. I do. I love Christian Emory Bainbridge.

Now, what to do about it?

Raine was riddled with uncertainty, debating between telling the adorable man yes or hiding until he'd repaired all the duke's timepieces and retreated to London when Charlotte Webster, Lady Ann's personal maid, stepped from the pantry. Newly married to Phillip, the cook's son, Charlotte glowed like a lit candle rested inside her, her pleasant personality. She had a devilish wit that came out in only the loveliest of ways, no cuts involved, which in Raine's experience was rare.

Charlotte would understand her dilemma; her marriage to Phillip was a love-match.

"Raine, dear, you look like you've seen a ghost." Charlotte wiped her hands on the cloth she held and tilted her head in consideration. "Are you unwell?"

Raine knocked the frilled edge of her cap from her eyes, wondering if she looked like she'd been ravished. She felt like she had. "Do you have time for a walk? Through the gardens, perhaps? The flowers are in bloom and quite lovely." She tangled her hands in her apron and groaned. "I have a question. A concern. About a man. A vexing, tempting, wonderful man. I'm confused and excited and, oh, so many things!"

Charlotte's green eyes widened, and she choked back a laugh. "How could I say no when this sounds like it will be the most entertaining conversation of my day? I'd rather talk about men than new gowns. And I'm not due to assist Lady Ann and the modiste for another hour."

"Likely a very entertaining conversation," Raine muttered and turned down the main hall, heading to the servant's entrance at the rear of the house. Kit, as a guest of the duke, would use the main entrance. She used the rear. This difference in their lives was what she'd been trying to tell him, to no avail. He didn't seem to care, and she wondered if she should.

But what woman didn't want to be an asset to her husband?

She couldn't see what she had to offer when he had so much already.

The morning was a warm one for Yorkshire, the somber sky casting dappled light across the path they took over the lawn. In the distance, she could see the bridge she'd traversed last night, falling in love by the time she arrived on the other side. When they reached the gardens, Raine inhaled the scent of lilacs and hibiscus, bees and butterflies flitting around her. She didn't have a green thumb like her father, although she'd

spent many a day with him in Tavistock's gardens, listening to his advice about how to make his beloved plants flourish. Usually, the thought of family brought a stinging sense of loneliness, but instead, now, she imagined Kit beside her—and felt empowered.

Charlotte crossed to a marble bench surrounded by a riot of colorful blooms, stretched her arms over her head and sighed. "I love summer. My favorite season." She patted the empty spot next to her. "Come tell me about this tempting, vexing, wonderful man. I admit I can't wait to hear the story. A certain groom has taken quite a fancy to you if gossip is accurate."

Raine settled beside Charlotte, plucked a daisy from its stem, and twirled it between her fingers. She hoped Charlotte wouldn't be irritated to learn the man she wanted to discuss wasn't Nash Cartwright. "How did you know? With Phillip? That it was love?"

Charlotte clicked her tongue against her teeth, selected her own daisy, and lifted it to her nose. "He's called me Lottie since we were little, but there was this shift, and the next time that nickname rolled from his lips, my world expanded. I felt a glow. Like I was lifted from my slippers. It suddenly occurred to me that we weren't simply friends anymore." She dusted the petals against her palm. "And there was an impressive kiss. That, too."

Raine laughed and gave her daisy a spin. "Ah, a blinding kiss. That sounds about right."

"He was funny and charming, a bit naughty. Handsome. Frankly, he was everything. When I knew he loved me, too..." She shrugged, a dreamy tilt curving her lips. "There was no question."

“So you can just know,” Raine whispered. “In an instant.”

Charlotte nodded. “Sometimes, yes, of course. However, Phillip and I took years to get around to it. We aren’t a perfect example.”

“It’s complicated. This man I speak of”—Raine laid the flower on her apron and glanced into Charlotte’s eyes, then back at her worn slippers—“he’s not a servant. It won’t advance his life, his career, his holdings in any of the ways another marriage, to someone more appropriate, wealthy or highborn, would. But he doesn’t care about that, and I’m not sure I should care so very much.”

“Does Mister Bainbridge love you? Do you love him? I think these are the questions you should ask yourself. That you should consider above any other. Not if he’s listed in *Debrett’s Peerage* or needs funds for his watchmaking business, which I can assure you, from what I know, he does not.”

Raine’s heart dropped to her knees. She swiveled on the bench, marble snagging her dress. “How did you know?”

Charlotte chewed on her lip, her smile when it broke through positively wicked. “You crossed the main hall yesterday on your way to the kitchens. You were reading a book and almost walked into a wall. Mister Bainbridge was at the front door with Lord Jonathan, and his gaze followed you until you were lost from sight. His expression...” She fanned her cheeks and trailed the daisy across them. “His expression was a study in dazzled befuddlement. He had to shake himself out of a stupor as if he’d had a sudden rush of blood to the head.” She pointed her flower at Raine, shrugged a slim shoulder. “He’s been here before, and certainly, there have been rumors in the scandal sheets, men will be men, but he’s always seemed lonely to me. Remote, without anyone except

that scamp of a valet, Mister Pennington, by his side. So, my dear Miss Mowbray, what you can offer, if he loves you, is *you*. Not funds or property or a silly title, but you. And *you* are the only you he'll ever be lucky enough to find."

Raine watched a ladybug crawl along the bench and, with a flicker of its wings, drift from sight. The anguish in Kit's voice when he spoke of having no one after his family died whispered through her mind. Even with the wenches and the watches, she suspected he *was* lonely. In a way only someone just as lonely could understand. "Will the duke be incensed if I agree to marry Mister Bainbridge and move to London? He did go to such trouble to secure my future and get me away from Tavistock House."

Charlotte giggled and threw her arm around Raine's shoulder, sending their daisies tumbling to the grass. "He's a romantic! Do you see the way he looks at the duchess when she doesn't *know* he's looking? He'll be extremely happy for you. Just think, we can have another wedding in the chapel! This is the most glorious year ever!"

Abigail Frank and Rex Ableman had gotten married in the estate's chapel just after Raine arrived at Hartland Abbey, and Charlotte and Phillip had married there one month ago.

"Are you going to say yes?" Charlotte asked. "Tell me you are. I'll help you plan, and we can have a dress made and..."

Raine smiled softly and ducked her head, Charlotte's excited chatter flowing over her, the image of taking Kit's hand in the enchanting Devon sanctuary too wonderful to imagine.

She only had to find the courage to seize her heart's desire.

It was as simple as that.

Six



Hartland Abbey was tranquil, hushed, servants above and below stair asleep, duties complete. Kitchens cleaned, wicks extinguished, floors swept, beds turned, basins freshened. Raine tiptoed down the hallway, halting at Kit's bedchamber door. It had been easy, a remark about the delivery of a letter that didn't exist, to find out which room was his. She placed her hand on the walnut door as if she'd be able to feel his presence, then laughed at herself for such lovesick foolishness.

She stood there for a minute, perhaps two, the tick of a mantel clock Kit had likely recalibrated signaling the passing of time and her increasing cowardice.

"Damn and blast," Raine whispered and tapped on the door. How hard was it to tell a man you loved him? Wanted to marry him. Live the rest of your days watching him fiddle with his timepieces. Translate his ridiculously intricate chronometer designs and have his undoubtedly gorgeous children.

She pressed her hand to her quivering belly.

Very hard, indeed.

The knob squealed, and the door inched open. Raine exhaled, then caught herself, and clamped her lips shut as

Christian moved into view, perching his shoulder on the doorjamb with a look of surprise, pleasure, and finally, uncertainty. She took him in from head to toe. *Heavens*. Trousers hanging low on his lean hips. No shirt, no shoes, no stockings. A dusting of hair on his chest that trailed down and into his wrinkled waistband. His body was lean but layered with muscle. A body she wanted to press into service, to warm like clay with her hands and *sculpt*. Her skin flushed, a steady, unfamiliar pulse settling between her thighs.

She'd never seen a man in such an unclothed state—but she presumed from her response that she rather liked it.

He allowed the perusal, patient, relaxed, a wry smile turning his lips, that enchanting dimple denting his cheek. “Do I pass muster?” he murmured after a charged pause, rotating the tiny screwdriver he held in his hand.

She nodded to the tool. “Do you work at all hours?”

He glanced at her bare toes peeping from the hem of her dress with a raised brow. “It’s what I have, Miss Mowbray. It’s what I have.”

She flushed, not about to tell him she’d raced from her attic bedchamber to his door without stockings or slippers. “Are you going to send me away?” she asked because he seemed to be guarding the room.

In response, Christian trailed the pointed tip of the screwdriver from the end of her ring finger to her wrist. She sucked in a gasp, her hand flexing, her knees trembling beneath her skirt. “Are you going to marry me, Raine? Not to sound missish, but if you want this”—he nodded to the bedchamber—“you’re going to have to marry me to get it. My body, mind, and soul are yours if you’ll agree to take them. But I won’t ruin you. I won’t. And I can’t share any more of

myself and wonder if I'll get it back. I'm in too deep for that." He swallowed hard, his sapphire eyes darting to the floor, and she knew with such sweet simplicity that her roguish, complicated, brilliant watchmaker was as delicate of heart as she. "You fear being beholden, but what if I were to tell you I would be wholly beholden as well? What if *we* are worth more than any promise you made to yourself?" His gaze lifted, his earnestness smoothing away her fear like a plane to rough wood. "I won't own you in any way you don't own me."

Encouraged by his passionate focus, she wiggled the screwdriver from his grasp and trailed it along the line of hair on his chest, over his ribs, halting at his navel. He blew out a startled breath and whispered her name beneath it. Two could play this game, she thought. And she'd always loved games. "You've decided then?"

His muscles quivered beneath the cool metal. "In 1810, as a matter of fact."

She laughed, freely, joyously, astonished by her boldness. "What about the wenches?"

With a quick look down the thankfully deserted hallway, he grasped her wrist and dragged her into the room. "No more wenches. You, my lovely bluestocking, are more than enough for this lifetime."

Turning, she rested against the door, the taper on the bedside table throwing a golden glow over a space that held his scent so firmly she felt a quiver run through her. *Bluestocking*. How odd. How enchanting. "Kit Bainbridge, if I tell you I love you more than I imagined possible, that I don't want to be without you for another moment, that you are the most incredible man I've ever met, can I have a modest token of appreciation before the wedding? Our wedding." She

pressed her lips together, holding back her smile as he absorbed her adoring confession. “A kiss, perhaps. Like the one in the study earlier today. That little thing you did, when you nibbled on my bottom lip. Heavenly.”

“I think I can arrange that,” he whispered and reached, tugging her mobcap from her head and dropping it to the floor. Removed one hairpin at a time until her chignon collapsed over her shoulders in a golden shroud. “Your hair is divine. Never restrain it. Beautiful things should be able to follow their own will.” He filled his hand with the strands, trailing his fingers up the nape of her neck and bringing her against his hard body.

She caught his shoulders and swayed, melting into him. His skin was warm beneath her questing fingers, a smattering of hair on his chest, a mottled scar on his shoulder.

Tipping her head high, he captured her lips beneath his and circled her, once, twice, like they waltzed across a ballroom. He breathed into her mouth, used his tongue to engage and attack, unleashing her rabid hunger. Bowing into him, she threaded her arms around his neck and put every part of her lonely soul into the kiss, without hesitation or fear. Within moments, they were lost.

Obliterated, shattered.

When her hip bumped the bed, he halted, a fierce exhalation racing from his lips, his dazed eyes meeting hers. “Will that suffice? For the token of appreciation?”

Gazing at him, she searched her heart for what she wanted.

Not what society expected or what anyone would advise her to do. She searched for what *she*, Raine Mowbray, wanted. Obedience be damned, she thought. Presenting her back, she

swept her hair over one shoulder, bowed her head. She could feel his moist breath against her neck as he leaned in but didn't touch. Her awareness of another human being had never been this potent, desire connecting them as if the emotion held its own life force.

"Undress me, Kit," she whispered with a teasing look thrown back at him.

"Are you sure?" His pupils flared, a flood of dark black. "We have time. Thousands of nights."

She closed her eyes as the screwdriver slipped from her hand to the carpet. "I love you. And I want our life, the 'we' you spoke of, to start right now."

Goosebumps exploded along her arms as he went to work on her practical gown fit for summer servitude and nothing more, loosening the tie at her neck, releasing the hook and eyelets at her waist. The material drooped, and Christian swept his hand around her hips, pulling her back against his aroused body as his lips fell to her neck. Teeth nipping, tongue soothing, her muffled sigh expressed her arousal, her *impatience*.

"A slim form such as yours does not need a corset," he said into the curve of her shoulder.

She turned in his arms, letting her dress puddle at her feet. "Just how well do you know women's apparel, Kit Bainbridge?"

He cupped her cheek, tilted her face up. "I can't recall anyone before you. You're all I desire. My heart, my soul. There's no one else. Really, there never has been."

He was skilled, even if she wished he wasn't, removing her frayed petticoat and chemise while kissing the very life

from her, until she stood before him in a pool of spent clothing, longing forging a persuasive path from her inflamed mind to her tingling toes. When she shivered and made to cross her hands over her chest, he held her arms by her side. “Oh, no. You are breathtaking, more beautiful than I’d dreamed, and I’ve spent many nights dreaming, Raine. But let’s level the playing field, I agree. Where you go, I follow.” Stepping back, his fingers went to the fall of his breeches, unbuttoning as her heart raced. He wore no drawers, and when he flicked open the final button and kicked aside the garment, there wasn’t a stitch of cotton or linen between them.

She hadn’t known what to imagine, but *he* was the beautiful one. Lithe and lean, his skin golden, a body in ideal balance. Her gaze traveled below his waist. A prolonged breath escaped through her teeth as he took himself in hand and stroked, slowly, his eyes locked on hers.

“Are you certain you’ll fit?”

“Trust me, love, we were made for each other.” Smiling, he gave her a gentle push that sent her across the feather mattress, where he then flooded over her. His serene patience evaporated the moment his skin met hers, his hands roaming as his lips reclaimed.

It was an assault, sure, steady, relentless.

Hunger, reckless passion.

Desperation.

With a hoarse murmur, she gripped his hip, his shoulder, nails scraping his back, hardly knowing how she’d come to be squeezed into this molten, quivering mass of flesh, not one whit of intent beyond a maddening race for pleasure. His hand cupped her breast, thumb sweeping her nipple, circling, and

sweeping again. Her back arched off the mattress, and she let out a frayed sound, interrupting a kiss she could no longer sustain.

“Duly noted,” he murmured and tugged the peaked nub between his lips, biting lightly until she felt the hard pinch in her fingertips, the soles of her feet, the backs of her knees. Her rough moan shattered the stillness, her hands falling from him to twist in the counterpane, her body curving into his touch. A sharp gust ripped in the open window and swept her, cooling skin reheated moments later. Stunned, she lay there as he kissed one breast and palmed the other, switched, then switched again, until she could absorb nothing but their gulping, ragged breaths, walled inside a house of pleasure.

“Your heartbeat is racing beneath my lips. I’m crazy for the feel of you.” He shifted his hips with a groan, his cock settling against her warm folds, a natural, flawless fit. They moved together, creating a rhythm he echoed with his tongue when he captured her mouth beneath his.

Awash in sensation, her fingers rose to tangle in his hair as she begged for more.

He snaked his hand between their bodies, palming her thigh, delving between her legs. He queried lightly, gently, sliding a finger inside her, a leisurely effort that left her trembling, strung tight, expectant. *Wanting*. This was *nothing* like what she’d done to herself on those solitary nights in her bed, her knowledge of her body slight but her yearning fierce.

It was as if he knew her better than she knew herself.

Knew exactly where to touch her, *how* to touch her.

“There. More, oh, Kit,” she whispered against his shoulder as he inserted another finger, biting his skin to emphasize her

plea. “*There.*”

When she went to touch him, feel his rigid length for the first time, he lifted her arm high over her head, stretching her body out like one of his chains beneath him. “My bluestocking arrives, wild and greedy. I would love to have your hands on me, but if that happens now, I’ll come in seconds.” Rising over her, he braced his weight on his forearm, never releasing his hold on her, below the waist or above. “Look at me, love.”

When she did, she found his gaze stunned, brow moist, cheeks glowing, lips parted—truthfully looking as devastated as she felt. “What?” she murmured, lost, trying to catch what she’d missed. “Why did you stop?”

He grinned, laughed softly, looking so boyishly handsome her heart stuttered. “I love you, Raine, with everything inside me, and I’ll thank God every day for sending you to me again. I just wanted you to know before I took you.” Astonishing admission released to the night, he positioned his body and slid inside her, just enough. Not nearly enough. The feeling of fullness was astounding, frightening...magnificent.

He caught her thigh, angling her leg over his hip and stroked, taking calm possession until they were locked, hip to hip. Tunneling his arm beneath her, he set a fundamental rhythm, a cadence neither reckless nor rushed. An elegant tempo of slick skin, seeking hands, broken, uneven kisses. Half-breaths and fractured moans. She answered his earnest questions—*is this okay, does it hurt*—his aroused murmurs a bottomless tremor in her ear. And he followed her instructions—*faster, deeper, there*—with almost perfect devotion.

She moved against him, drove him, drove herself, with confidence born of instinct.

Any pain was fleeting, minor, and after a few moments, nonexistent. The world constricted to his frantic directions, his clutching hold, his weight, the salty taste of his skin. The tart scent of them riding the air, the sheets, their bodies.

She tried to tell him what was happening inside her, the creeping sensation of being swept away on a roaring tide, but the tremors racking her made speech challenging and rational thought impossible. But he understood, reaching between them, a final, prolonged touch between her legs all it took to unleash her climax. An endless release that drew reason and breath from her until she was boneless, floating on a sea of twisted silk bedding, helpless to do anything but allow passion to take her.

His answering groan and thrust deep, deep inside her confirmed he'd reached this wondrous place, too.

They gasped and clung, lips touching, chests heaving, brow to brow, cheek to cheek. He tried to say something but finally shook his head and collapsed to his side, bringing her with him. Wordlessly, he tucked her against his body. She opened her mouth, feeling she must say *something*, but he shook his head again and whisked his finger across her lips. *Not yet.*

Before she could take another breath, her solicitous, remarkable intended tumbled into an exhausted sleep.

She could only sigh, laugh, and join him, her heart lighter than a butterfly's wings.



SHE WASN'T ALONE.

The panicked realization ripped through Raine's mind before she remembered. Blinking, she rose to her elbow, her hair a flaxen shroud falling over the man whose shoulder she'd been using as a pillow. Christian's breathing was even, his lids fluttering with dreams she hoped she inhabited. She looked to the window, determined it to be an hour or so before dawn. She'd need to leave him soon, creep back to the attic, and pretend she'd been there all night.

Instead of what she'd been doing, which was planning her future.

Raine dropped her cheek to her hand, allowing herself a moment to watch him. Record every inch of him as she'd been too occupied during the night to do. The sheet was tangled about his long legs and drawn judiciously to his trim waist. His belly rose and fell with his breaths. She trailed a finger up his chest, traced a crescent scar on his neck, marveled at eyelashes that looked like the tips had been dipped in amber.

He wasn't perfect. He had a temper. He was impulsive. Even a little arrogant. But he was also generous. Considerate. Shy, unbelievably. And so talented he made her proud when she'd no reason to claim the sentiment.

He was a sincere man in a society of impersonators.

And he was *hers*.

"Your scrutiny is lighting me up like you pressed a glowing ember against my skin," he whispered and rolled over her, their bodies settling flawlessly into place. "I'm a watchmaker without a timepiece. How long do we have?" He gazed to the window, chewed his bottom lip in deliberation. "I have an appointment with Devon at nine, the courtesy of informing him of our upcoming nuptials before any bit of nonsense about us is repeated. In light of your father not being

here for me to ask. Though once we return to London, it's my first task."

Her heart squeezed. Love was a powerful drug, indeed. "We have ten minutes, maybe fifteen."

He nodded, the keen glow in his eyes sending a serrated pulse through her. "I'll make it work."

"We'll see," she said as he dipped his head to nibble on a sensitive spot beneath her jaw. Both times during the night had taken longer, *much* longer.

"Oh, love, just watch me." His hand swept low, his fingers, his tongue, his teeth following just behind, turning her world upside down. "And you know what they say. Third time's a charm."

So, she did. And it was.

Seven



Christian was rarely nervous.

However, the Duke of Devon's regard across the breakfast table was unflinching, rather like Christian had felt upon being summoned to the headmaster's office at Harrow. Which, due to his tenacious nature, had occurred often.

After escorting Raine to her attic chamber without incident just before dawn, he'd taken a stroll around the estate, nerves snapping, pulse drumming. Nervousness was allowed; it wasn't every day a man publicly professed his love and intention to marry the woman of his dreams. Across the sloping lawn, over the bridge, and past the spot where he and Raine had shared the first of what would surely be many arguments, he'd considered his future and his extreme good fortune.

He was, after all, gaining a passionate wife.

And passionate women didn't always do what their men wanted them to.

When the sun had risen high enough in a vivid blue sky to designate it appropriate, he'd gone in search of James Hampton, the fourth Duke of Devon. Surprisingly, Christian was directed to the breakfast room, where His Grace, an early riser unlike most of the useless fops in the *ton* according to the

footman, was having tea while reviewing an ironed edition of *The Times*.

To say His Grace's glittering green gaze could cut glass as he waited for his watchmaker to get to the point would be apropos. Christian sipped his tea when he much preferred coffee and practiced his entry into the conversation. *You see, Your Grace, ten years ago...*

"Let me expedite the process as you're about to splash tea on your waistcoat. You've come to alert me to the fact that Miss Mowbray will not be in my employ for any longer than it takes you to finish calibrating my clocks. Does that adequately summarize the situation?"

Christian's cheeks stung, emotion flowing freely across his face an embarrassing predicament since he was a child. And then it occurred to him that someone in the house may have seen them sneaking through the halls this morning, fingers linked, faces aglow. "I don't... that is to say, Miss Mowbray..."

The duke laughed, bringing his napkin to his lips to hide it. "You've not been caught if that's your concern. And if it is, I'm heartily glad you're making the expedient decision to offer for the girl." He dusted his lips with the linen square and laughed again, truly the first time Christian had known the man to show such cheerfulness. Being a source of entertainment was starting to nip at his self-esteem as much as embarrassment had his cheeks. "Calm down, my man. Miss Mowbray spoke to someone in the household, a request for feminine advice, I believe. It traveled from there, quite swiftly, into my ears. I'm a fair taskmaster, Bainbridge, so my staff talks to me. I know it's unheard of in some aristocratic

families, but I prefer it to surviving on a bolster of fear and intimidation.”

Christian placed his cup on the saucer before he dribbled tea as the duke had predicted. “The particulars aren’t valuable to anyone but us, but I’ve loved her for ten years. This isn’t a chance occurrence for me, random temptation or some such. Happening upon her here, in your employ, is nothing short of a miracle. I’ll go to any length to secure her happiness. You have my word.”

A boy raced into the room and threw himself at the duke. “Father! You must come and see what I’ve built. It’s simply marvelous. Miss Daisy said it’s the best castle she’s ever seen!”

Devon ruffled his son’s hair and gifted him with a loving smile. “I’ll come straightaway, Nicholas. Just give me a moment to finish my discussion with Mister Bainbridge.”

Nicholas turned to Christian with an impish smile. “You’re the watchmaker.”

“I am indeed. I wasn’t much older than you when I started taking timepieces apart and putting them back together.” He pulled a center wheel from his waistcoat pocket and offered it to the boy. Nicholas snatched it from Christian with a gasp of delight. Christian’s heart softened, thinking of a child with Raine’s golden eyes someday staring up at him. “I’m working on Philip Webster’s pocket watch this morning. If you come to your father’s study in one hour, if your governess allows it, I’ll show you exactly where it fits within the other parts. Maybe I’ll even, if you have a very steady hand, let you tighten a case screw.”

Nicholas traced his finger over the wheel. “I have a steady hand like no other. I’m a Devon.”

Christian grinned, charmed. “Well, then, you’ll be an ace at it right off.”

The duke gave his son a nudge. “Back to the nursery. Tell Miss Daisy one hour, in my study, for a watchmaking lesson. Thank Mister Bainbridge for the wheel.”

Nicholas bowed dutifully and offered his thanks before bolting from the room.

“You’re good with children,” Devon said with a speculative look in his eye.

Christian fiddled with his silverware, his gaze going to a dour landscape hanging on the wall behind the duke. “I want a family. As it is, I have none.”

The duke wiped at a smudge on the table, then placed his napkin in his lap. “I can speak with Vicar Rawley if you’d like to have the ceremony here. My chapel is exceedingly lovely if I do say so myself. We’ve recently hosted two weddings, and it didn’t take long to arrange either. Then, you can get started right away on that family you’re seeking.”

Christian blinked, stunned by the offer. He would have to speak to Raine, but he’d like nothing more than to secure her hand before they returned to London. “Is marriage easy?” he blurted out, having no idea this would fall from his lips.

The duke’s teacup and saucer rattled as he bumped them, glee splitting his cheeks. “Who told you that balderdash? Easy? What woman have you ever found to be easy? But the easy ones, my friend, are also *boring*. You want to avoid monotony at all costs. My duchess has never bored me a day in my life.”

“Oh, Raine’s far from boring. Or easy, come to think of it.” He frowned as he recalled their argument beside the bridge,

the way he'd had to practically beg her to marry him. "Very intelligent but rather stubborn, not to place too fine a point on it." Suddenly, the way they'd challenged each other with bold, teasing touches and stimulating conversation until dawn clouded his mind and tightened his body.

"She sounds perfect. And from the smile on your face, I'd say you agree."

Christian rose and gave the duke a shallow bow. "Far from perfect, Your Grace, only perfect for me."

Then he went to find the perfectly stubborn woman who would be his wife.

Epilogue



A romantic morning two months later...

Berkeley Square, London

“**K**it,” Raine said as she stumbled over a wrinkle in the carpet, “I’m going to trip. Let me see.”

He laughed, a sound she would never tire of hearing, his hand shifting from where he held it over her eyes, allowing a burst of sunlight to sneak in and dust her face. His body was pressed against hers as he guided her down the hallway of their London townhouse, and she gave her bottom a little wiggle to throw him off his mark.

“Oh, no, my lovely bluestocking. You’re not using that trick on me. Penny nearly walked in on us in the morning room last week, or have you forgotten? The man doesn’t knock and you’re insatiable. Cross purposes I’m left to safely coordinate.”

“I thought you *liked* that I’m greedy where you’re concerned.”

Christian halted, tilted Raine’s chin, and covered her lips in a heated side-kiss that left them both dazed. “Where was I headed again?” he murmured against the nape of her neck once his breath had settled.

Raine lifted her gaze to his bottomless blue one, love a rushing tide through her veins. “It’s a surprise, so I don’t know!”

“Ah, yes.” Christian nudged her toward a paneled door at the end of the hall. “I remember now. Your touch is finally loosening its hold on me.”

“But this is your new study,” she said and glanced back at him. “You had the carpenters in all week. I haven’t stepped inside, not once, as you requested, though I don’t know what trouble I could have—”

He reached around her and opened the door.

She peeked inside, then leaned back into him with a low sigh. “Oh...*Kit*.”

“Go on.” He gave her another nudge, pushing her into the room.

She looked around, turned a full circle in wonder. The space was perfect.

It was her. And *him*.

Sunlight a bold wash over furnishings in shades of blue and green, her favorite colors. A magnificent globe showing the constellations, because she and Kit liked to gaze at the sky during their walks through their lush Mayfair garden. A set of stately library chairs situated before a blazing hearth. A brocade chaise in the corner, fresh flowers in a vase on the table beside it. Kit knew she liked to read and nap, and that she loved the sweet scent of wildflowers. Floor-to-ceiling shelves housing more volumes than she could read in a lifetime seized her imagination as she walked into the room. Crossing to the mahogany bookcases, she ran her finger down a stiff leather spine and drew in the refreshing scent of new books. “You’re

spoiling me. New clothes and my very own phaeton. A personal account, a staff at my disposal. I'm completely ruined for life."

He closed the door to the library—*her* library—and leaned against it. "You're right, I am. And, damn, I'm enjoying it."

She turned to face him, propped her hip against the bookshelf, and willed her heart to quiet its mad romp. She searched her mind for what to say, how to thank him, how to *tell* him. But only tears came, in great, heaving gulps.

He reached her in seconds and pulled her into his arms. "Raine, don't. This is meant to be the happiest of places. Almost from the first moment at the duke's home, I've dreamed about creating this spot for you. Don't cry. Please, you'll have me on my knees in moments."

She melted into him, his heart thumping beneath her cheek. "I love it. I love *you*. But you don't have to...do so much." She sniffled, unused to emotional displays when she'd been profoundly expressive since the day of their wedding at Hartland Abbey five weeks earlier. "Give so much."

He tipped her chin high, his smile contrite. "This next bit may not help your tears subside."

"*What?*" she breathed. "There's more?"

He reached in his trouser pocket, retrieved a small wrapped parcel with a hand that shook. "I'd like to say this is nothing, but it's everything. More than the sapphire on your finger, more than this library and the phaeton put together." Tapping the package to his chest, he whispered, "This is my heart."

She unwrapped the parchment, knowing before she looked inside what he'd given her. The watch was delicately crafted,

smaller, and more elegant than his usual pieces; the silver case etched with roses interwoven with her initials. The chain was one she recognized. "I thought I'd lost this," she murmured and brought the timepiece to her chest.

"Too fine to be a bookmark, I agree."

"There was never anything wrong with the filigree, was there?"

He shook his head. "No. But like my heart, I knew it was yours. There's an inscription on the inside."

Snapping the case open, she saw the words and felt her heart drop: *at first sight*. "Kit..." Her eyes stung, and she blinked rapidly. "I will treasure this forever."

He pressed a tender kiss to her brow, her temple, her cheek. "Darling, I'm a watchmaker. This can't be that much of a surprise."

"But you've never," she sniffled again and tucked herself into him, "the wenches."

His chest rumbled with his laughter. "Never have I given a wench a watch. You are the first. The only."

"That's good," she said into his now-damp linen shirt. "Because when the *ton* sees this, every woman in London will demand one. Prinny will have you make one for Maria Fitzherbert, you can certainly bet."

"I'll avoid that if I can." Taking her shoulders, he moved her back a step and reached into his trouser pocket.

"Oh, no more, Kit." She backed away, shaking her head until her hair fell like a shroud around her face. "My heart can't take it."

He grinned, a wicked, knowing turn of his lips. “This gift, the third and final for today, is perhaps more for me.” Crossing to the door, he fit a key into the lock and turned the tumblers with a snap. “The sturdiest bolt in England, or so I’m told. Enough to keep out even the most inquisitive of valets.”

“Penny doesn’t have a copy?”

Christian pocketed the key and leaned against the door with a licentious smirk. “No, and he’ll never get one. This room is *ours*.”

She tilted her head toward the chaise lounge. “That looks sturdy.”

“Hmm, very. I selected it myself.”

Giving her watch a swift glance, she crooked her finger, beckoning. “Do you have time to assist me with a project?” She flipped a button on her bodice. “A particularly knotty one, requiring a most refined touch.”

Everything he felt for her swept his face, filled his eyes—matching every wondrous thing filling hers. Pushing off the door, he moved to her. “Darling, I thought you’d never ask.”

The lock held.

And the love lasted.

About Tracy Sumner

Thank you for reading Kit and Raine's love story! I learned so much about love AND watchmaking while writing this novella! Check out my new releases (Regency, Victorian and American historicals)

Please sign up for my newsletter for a steamy free read (*Chasing the Duke*) and receive exclusive updates about releases, sneak peeks, sales and giveaways!

<https://www.tracy-sumner.com/newsletter/>

And my latest release, *The Wicked Wallflower*. The hero, Xander Macauley, has a Bainbridge in his collection!

Happy reading, always. xoxo

Loving My Wicked Rogue



SCANDALOUS GENTLEMEN BOOK ONE

DAWN BROWER

For all those that find strength when they need it most. Do not give up. You never know what you might discover in the middle of your journey.

You must be the best judge of your own happiness.

— JANE AUSTEN, EMMA

Prologue



December 1865

Lady Francesca Kendall stared at the Christmas decoration she'd made, and frowned. It was lovely to spend time with her cousin, Lady Adeline Carwyn. They were only a few years apart in age. Francesca had turned eight and ten a few months prior, and Adeline was three years older than her. Christmastide was being celebrated at Whitewood Abbey, Adeline's home, or more accurately the home of her parents the Duke and Duchess of Whitewood. Adeline's mother was Francesca's father's sister. They were close, and had a celebration with their entire family every Christmas.

“What do you think of this?” Francesca asked. She held up a star that she'd colored a pale yellow. It was plain, simple, and in her opinion, elegant. That was how Francesca hoped to present herself to the ton during her first season. She would have her comeout ball in March when the season started. She couldn't wait until she could attend balls, soirees, garden parties, and more. Francesca couldn't understand why Adeline hated them so much.

“It is quite lovely,” Adeline said. “It’ll make a nice addition to the tree when we decorate it tomorrow.” She held up her own ornament and asked, “Do you think it is too much?” She was painting an angel in a circular piece of clay. It was exquisite.

“Oh...” She nibbled on her bottom lip and looked back at her star. Maybe she could do better. “You are so talented. I wish I had...something.” Francesca was terrible at the pianoforte, mediocre at drawing and watercolors, and abysmal at needlepoint. In short, she had more failings than winsome attributes.

“Do not be that way,” Adeline said. Her tone held a hint of chastisement. “You’re brilliant, beautiful, and the very epitome of benevolence.” She smiled softly. “And I love you. I do not want to listen to you berate yourself, or what you believe to be your lack of marketable traits.”

She pasted a smile on her face. Francesca didn’t particularly feel pretty or desirable. Perhaps that would change after her comeout. She prayed she wouldn’t become a wallflower, or a spinster like Adeline. Francesca wanted to find love and have a marriage like her parents had. They loved each other so much it almost hurt to watch them. How possible was it for her to find a love as special and strong as theirs? “I’ll try, it’s all I can promise.” She glanced away and started to add more flourish to her star. If Adeline could create something as special as an angel ornament, surely she could make something equally as pretty. Adeline stood and wiped her hands on her apron.

“Are you already finished,” Francesca asked. “I’m not nearly done.”

“I am.” She smiled at her. “I’m weary and am going to lie down until dinner.” She did appear a bit fatigued. “When you’re done do not forget to wash and change. You have a bit of paint in your hair and on your hands. You probably brushed your hand over your hair.”

Adeline glanced at her hands and frowned. She did have paint all over her hands and the apron she wore over her gown. Francesca stared down at herself. “I will, thank you.” She should be more careful, but part of her didn’t care. She’d been trying to be creative after all.

“Will you be joining us for tea?” Francesca asked. She brushed a lock of her strawberry blonde hair behind an ear. Sometimes she wished she had golden blonde hair like Adeline. Her reddish locks were not nearly as fashionable. There was so much about herself she wished she could change, but accepted she couldn’t. Francesca needed to stop comparing herself to Adeline. It would lead her nowhere. All the negativity did not do any good, and she loved her cousin. She wouldn’t hurt her for anything and yet, she couldn’t stop being a brat, at least in her mind.

“I am uncertain,” she told her nonchalantly. “But don’t expect me. I may stay in my chambers longer depending on how I feel.”

“All right,” Francesca said absentmindedly. Francesca had turned her attention back to her ornament already, and frowned again. Maybe she’d do an outline in another color. She wasn’t certain how to make it stand out. “Have a nice rest.”

“I will,” Adeline told her and then smiled softly. “Do not fret. Your ornament really is quite lovely.” With those words Adeline left Francesca alone. She painted a thin dark yellow outline and considered it good. Perhaps Adeline was right. It

was beautiful and she should stop doubting herself. She carried it over to the table to dry. They'd add ribbon to their ornaments before putting them on the tree.

Adeline cleaned up her supplies, and then left the craft room. As she was rounding the corner to go up to her bedchamber she stumbled against a man. She mumbled her apologies before she glanced up. Her mouth went dry and she lost all ability to think, let alone speak. He had thick black hair, and eyes so blue they took her breath away. In short, she was a bumbling mess. Francesca had never seen a man as beautiful as this one, and had nothing to fall back on in her interaction with him.

“No need to apologize,” he said in a husky tone. She'd somehow managed to find her breath, and shivers went down her spine as he spoke. God help her. “It was all my fault.” He had so much charm no lady would be able to resist. Who was he?

She shook her head still unable to speak. What was wrong with her? So he was gorgeous. That shouldn't matter! If she had any chance of having a successful season she had to learn to use her voice. “My lord,” she curtsied. “It was indeed my fault. I cannot let you take the blame.”

His lips tilted upward into a sinful smile that promised he could be quite wicked if a lady let him have his way with her. Francesca had never been so tempted to offer herself to a man before. But to be fair, no men like this one lived near her home in Kent. “A gentleman would never let a lovely lady as you carry such a burden.” He held out his hand to her. “Why don't you stroll with me. I'm only here until morning and I find myself a bit lonely.”

She frowned. Francesca should help out and spend some time with him. This was her aunt's house, and she did know the layout, and what might appeal to him. "I am afraid we've not been introduced..."

"Then let's rectify that." He brought her hand up to his lips and pressed down in a soft kiss. "I am Matthew."

That was not at all what she meant. Using his surname was absolutely scandalous, and she shouldn't do it. She tilted her head to the side and studied him. What did this man hope to achieve by being wicked with her? "Matthew?"

"Yes," that rich tone of his voice was a weapon and a gift. More importantly he seemed to understand that and used it to his advantage.

"Do you not believe it's too familiar?" He was an enigma. Why would he not want to know more about her, or her him?

"Not at all," he said smoothly. Matthew stared intently into her eyes, and it made her want to believe everything he said to her. "I do believe you and I are destined to be...acquainted. Why stall the inevitable?"

Francesca barely held in a sigh. Was he right? Were they somehow meant to be? "I am Francesca," she acquiesced. "How do you feel about conservatories?"

"I love them," he said. "Is there one here? Will you show me?"

Francesca nodded. "The duchess has a lovely orange tree. It's one of the best conservatories in all of England, though perhaps not as wonderful as the one at Seabrook, I do love it."

He looped her arm with his. "Lead the way dear Cesca," he said in a tone so intimate it filled her with warmth. "And tell me about Seabrook. Have you visited there often?"

He didn't know who she was... Francesca smiled. She should tell him that the Marquess of Seabrook was her great uncle? Perhaps later. She liked this interaction with him and adored the shortened version of her name he used.

They reached the conservatory and Francesca was relieved no one else was there. That gave her more time alone with him. She led him to the orange tree. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"Not nearly as much as you are." She glanced at him and sucked in a breath. She may have never experienced desire, but she understood it existed. This man stared at her with so much need it made her insides quiver. She wanted him, and she decided she should have him.

"You say such sweet things Matthew." Her voice was soft and filled with the same need reflected in his eyes. "How sweet are you?"

"Let me show you," he said as he leaned down, and pressed his lips to hers.

The kiss was soft, coaxing, and as sweet as he promised. Then it turned into something much more passionate and consuming. He brought his hand up to her breast and dipped a finger underneath her bodice. He stroked her nipple and it hardened at his touch. The need between her thighs deepened and she didn't quite know what was happening.

He pushed the bodice down and lowered his head, sucked in that tight nipple, and she nearly screamed with pleasure. Sweet wasn't the right word. Matthew was a wicked rogue, and Francesca was falling in love with him. Nothing could stop the feelings spreading through her now.

He lifted her skirts and slid his hand between her thighs. She moaned as tiny quivers rocked her body. "You're so

responsive,” he whispered in her ear. “I want you.” He groaned as he slid a finger inside her. She pressed herself against him. She wanted him to.

And she decided to give herself to him, body, soul, and especially, all the love in her heart... “Yes,” she said. “Yes...” She promised herself she would not regret any of this. He was her destiny, and she’d never believed she’d be so lucky to find the man of her dreams before she started looking. Sometimes fate could be surprising in the best possible ways, and the pleasure Matthew made her feel...simply marvelous.

One



March 1866

Francesca was a fool... How could she have believed he loved her? She'd been hoping, and hoping for weeks now, and it was time to accept he didn't care for her at all. He'd seduced her, and it hadn't been particularly difficult either. She'd fallen willingly into his arms and hadn't regretted that choice.

Until now...

She slid her hand down her belly and fought tears. Her dilemma could no longer be ignored. She had feared her condition and wished it away, but doing either didn't change anything. Francesca didn't know what to do. This was not a situation she'd ever believed she'd find herself in.

Her heart hurt. When Matthew hadn't come for her she should have realized then he'd used her. She'd made so many excuses for him, and she couldn't change that. She couldn't change any of it. If she wasn't facing the consequences of her choice she'd have eventually found a way to forget him, or at least not cry as much at the loss.

Francesca would like to believe she was smarter now, but there was no way to determine if she'd be so foolish over a man again. Her naïveté had already come out shining on her

first interaction with a handsome scoundrel. She wished she'd been at least smart enough to ask for his full name. Francesca wanted to slap him in the face for taking advantage of her.

Someone had to know who he was. He'd been at a family gathering after all. There were always more than family at Christmastide. They had friends of friends there. The question was how to discover his name without spilling her own secret along the way...

She sighed. It seemed too difficult. Matthew had been her downfall, and soon the entire ton would be able to see for themselves the mistake she'd made. There was only so much time left before her belly gave it away. Even in that she wasn't certain how long it would be. She'd never been enceinte before...

"There you are," Scarlett Kendall, the Marchioness of Blackthorn, Francesca's mother said. "Why are you hiding out here?" Francesca inherited her strawberry blonde hair from her mother, though hers was lighter than her mother's richer red. The marchioness had hers pulled back into a simple plait, and her day dress, while elegant, was also a simple butter yellow with white lace trim around the bodice.

They had arrived in London earlier that week to prepare for the season. Her comeout ball would be in a couple of days. At first she'd been excited for it. Now she wished she could cancel it. Doing so would be a scandal in itself though, and she wouldn't add to her family's embarrassment. She'd sneaked out to the garden to find some peace from all the preparations. They had decided to stay at her grandfather, the Duke of Weston's, townhouse. The ballroom was larger and could accommodate the number of guests invited. After her ball they would retire to the smaller Blackthorn house.

“It’s a lovely day don’t you think?” It was actually quite chilly, but she’d needed the cooler air to help her overheated skin. She’d been ill at odd times of the day, and some days she seemed fine. At first she’d dismissed it as nerves. It wasn’t until a couple days ago she’d realized she couldn’t recall the last time her courses had come. “And there is so many people inside. It was stifling.” That part was the complete truth. Francesca had heard balls were so packed sometimes it was difficult to move. That sounded almost terrifying now considering her condition.

“I’m sorry,” her mother said. “Sometimes when one has to endure society obligations it can become unbearable.” She lifted her hand and brushed a stray lock behind Francesca’s ear. “But the good news is once this is done you can pick and choose what balls you wish to attend. Try to have fun.”

Francesca wished and wished... But wishing didn’t work. Her fate was already sealed. Since cancelling the ball was out of the question she’d see it through, and she would make a decision later what she should do next. She would like to at least attempt to uncover her baby’s father’s identity. If that wasn’t possible then she’d confess all to her parents. She hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

“I will have fun.” She smiled, but she didn’t feel even the slightest bit happy. Francesca wondered if she would ever feel that way again. “I’ve been looking forward to this ball for a while now.” And having her one night with Matthew had ruined it for her. “How could I not enjoy it. The preparations however...”

Her mother laughed. “They are tiresome.” The smile fell from her mother’s face. “Are you certain you are all right? I’ve been having strange dreams.”

Francesca's heart raced. Her mother had a prognostic gift, and if she had dreams...they might give away her secret. "I'm fine." She put more effort into her smile. "I promise. What were these dreams about?"

Her mother glanced away. "They were flashes really. You didn't look happy, there was a man but I only saw him from the back. He had dark hair..." She shook her head. "It's probably nothing. Maybe he's the one you're meant to fall in love with. The path isn't always easy on the course to true love."

Her mother couldn't be more wrong. Matthew didn't love her at all, and even if she found him Francesca doubted he'd take responsibility for the baby he'd help create. Still she had to try..

"You could be right. The ball is soon, and perhaps this mysterious man will be one of the guests."

Her mother hugged her. "I hope whoever the man is that wins your heart realizes how lucky he is to have you."

Francesca fought tears. Her voice was a little husky as she spoke, "I'm sure he will be worthy of it. I wouldn't pick a man undeserving now would I?"

"No you wouldn't," she agreed. Her mother pulled back then came to her feet. "Do not stay out here too long. It's too cold still." With those words she left Francesca alone with her thoughts once again...



MATTHEW GRANT, THE DUKE OF LINDSEY STARED OUT THE window in his study at his country estate, Lindy Castle. He'd grown up there. His parents had left him to the nanny's and governess's to raise. He didn't understand love, so it was no wonder he had been taken low by it when he was a green lad.

One lady, slightly older, and perhaps wiser had stolen his young heart and then crushed it cruelly. After that disastrous mistake he vowed never to give his heart to another. He had none to give either way, and now his heartless mother had decided it was time for him to marry. As if Matthew couldn't make a decision of his own.

If he wanted to marry there was one woman... He shook that thought away. Beautiful red haired beauties didn't belong in his world. He should never have had a taste of her innocence to begin with. He'd been a rotten bastard, and he laid awake many nights regretting making love to her. He couldn't go back and change it, and hell, he didn't really want to. She was the only good thing he'd had in his life and he wanted to cherish that memory.

"Are you listening to me?" Agatha, the Dowager Duchess of Lindsey demanded. His mother had finally realized that he'd stopped paying attention to her.

He took a sip of the brandy he held in his hand, then glanced briefly over his shoulder. "I do my best to never listen to you," he replied drolly. Why wouldn't she go away?

"You need to stop this roguish behavior. There are no heirs in the line of succession to the Lindsey title. If you don't marry and sire an heir..."

"The title will die with me." He rolled his eyes. "I know this and do not need you to remind me of it." He turned around and strolled back to his desk, then lifted the decanter to refill

his glass. "I don't bloody care if no one inherits the title. That seems far better than tying myself to a woman I'll hate."

"Once you have an heir you can ignore each other at your pleasure." His mother smiled. "It's an age old tradition."

"One you and my father did with aplomb." If his father hadn't died nearly ten years ago he'd probably be harassing Matthew too. "Forgive me if I do not wish to follow in your footsteps. I will not marry some cold society miss because you believe I need an heir."

His mother gasped. "Please tell me you do not have hopes to marry for love?"

Mathew burst into laughter. God help him. His mother was absolutely too much. "There is an appeal to that if you find it so offensive." He sipped more brandy. "However I believe in love less than I believe in marriage. It's a fantasy or for the very lucky." One of his friends was part of the latter. The Earl of Winchester had somehow miraculously found love over Christmastide. He didn't quite understand it. Love wasn't the norm, and as rare as it was, Matthew had no doubts he'd ever find it.

"Well at least you're not foolish enough to hold out for it." She brushed imaginary crumbs off her shoulder. "Now about your fiancée..."

"Bloody hell mother," he shouted at her as he slammed his glass on his desk. Brandy sloshed out and spilled over his hand. "I do not, nor will I ever have a damned fiancée. Stop this constant harping now."

"I'm not giving up on you marrying." She lifted her chin in defiance. "But I will give you some time to consider what I've

said. The dukedom is important and I do hope you'll want to leave all of this to your son one day."

He opened his mouth to yell at her again, but then reconsidered and closed it. Arguing with his mother would not help his situation. She believed what she did, and he had his own opinions. It was far better to put some distance between them. "I won't change my mind." The muscles in his jaws twitched. "And I am done with this discussion." Somehow he managed to remain cool and composed.

"A duke doesn't have the choice to refrain from marriage. If you don't choose your bride, one will help you choose her. Mark my words."

A flash of his red haired beauty came to mind again. He wanted her. Perhaps more than when he'd first met her. One taste hadn't been enough. Maybe he would try to find her again. If he were forced to have one woman as his wife she might do. No. He shook that thought away. He didn't want any bride...even her.

"You're wrong," he disagreed. "No woman will ever control me." He'd made that mistake once. Matthew learned from his mistakes. Edith Whitcomb had taught him that valuable lesson. When she shredded him with her machinations, and false love. She'd had him wrapped around her finger, and convinced him she'd make a wonderful wife. He'd been ready to run away with her before his father had stepped in. He'd offered her a better prize—an old duke and the title of duchess sooner than if she'd married him. Of course she couldn't have known Matthew's father would have a fatal accident a few months later. She could have had a younger husband, and the title too.

She deserved the bed she'd made for herself, and Matthew was free from ever marrying. His father had done him a favor, and he appreciated it, but not enough to finding a different bride. Even one as lovely as his Francesca. She would be far better off finding a gentleman worthy of her. Matthew was rotten through and through, and he accepted that. "I'm happier alone."

"Keep telling yourself that," his mother said. "One day you might even believe it."

He turned toward her. His mother was a lovely woman with hair the same black as his own, but she had light green eyes. There was some gray streaked through her dark locks, but only enough to make her seem even lovelier. She must have been quite the beauty in her day. "I already do believe it."

With those words he left his unfinished brandy on his desk, then stalked out of the room. He would travel to London immediately. There at least he had his club for entertainments, and perhaps a whore or two to help him forget a woman he couldn't erase from his mind on his own.

Two



When Francesca had woken up that morning she had to run to her washbowl as sickness overwhelmed her. Whatever had been left in her stomach had come back up. She'd never felt so miserable in her entire life. The very idea of food made her gag. She'd ordered tea and nothing else. The warmth liquid eased some of the queasiness in her stomach and by mid-morning she'd begun to feel almost normal again.

She held her hand over her stomach. The little baby growing inside of her was making itself known in the worst possible ways. She loved the child already and couldn't make herself completely regret his or her existence; however, that didn't negate her problem. She still needed a solution and had to find the baby's father to inform him of her condition. It was time to start that search and ask for help from the two people she trusted most with her secret—her two best friends, Violet and Iris Keene.

Francesca pulled the bell for her maid, Bess. She'd sent her away earlier when the very idea of rising for the day had seemed too tiresome. It didn't take long for Bess to walk into her bedchamber. She curtsied, "You need something my lady?"

“Yes,” Francesca said. “I am ready to dress for the day.” She slid out of bed. “I’m expected for tea at Dresden Manor.” Francesca always went to visit her friends on Thursdays and was thankful this visit wouldn’t be a surprise to anyone.

“Should you be going out when you are feeling unwell?” Bess asked. She tilted her head to the side. “You do seem to have some color back in your cheeks.”

She hated lying to Bess, but she had no choice. “Whatever it was it passed quickly.” Francesca lifted her lips into what she hoped was a cheerful smile. “I would hate to keep Iris and Violet waiting.” She desperately needed to see the two of them and ask for their help. Surely one of them might know who Matthew was. If she explained it all to them and her urgency they’d help. They had always been there for her and they wouldn’t let her down now. Francesca waited for Bess to retrieve the gown she’d planned to wear for her outing. They had discussed it the night before and Bess had taken it out to press. She’d returned it that morning when Francesca had been supposed to dress for the day. Since she hadn’t felt well, Bess had hung it up.

The dress was a periwinkle that brought out the blue in Francesca’s eyes. It was one of her favorite gowns, and she hoped it would make her feel pretty when she felt miserable at best. The sickness had passed; however, that didn’t mean she was better. Tea was the only thing she had any desire to consume.

Bess came over to her side. “Let’s get your stays tied now.”

Francesca sucked in a breath as her maid pulled on the ribbons. “Not too tight,” she said. “I would prefer to not add to my mishap from earlier.” She wasn’t certain how it might

affect the baby, and she honestly didn't want to fight breathing and her illness. One at a time was all she could feasibly handle.

“Very well, my lady,” Bess agreed. “You’re quite right.” After the stays were tied Bess helped her into her gown. “Now sit at the vanity so I can fix your hair.”

“Nothing to elaborate,” she told her. “I don’t wish to have head pain either.” Francesca didn’t know having a baby growing inside her would cause so much calamity on her body. She thought the worst part would be the delivery, and she sure as hell wasn’t looking forward to that part either.

Bess did a simple plait of Francesca’s hair and then wound it into a knot at the base of her neck. Once it was pinned in place Bess declared, “There. You’re ready for your visit now.”

“Thank you.” Francesca smiled. “I’ll retrieve my wrap and walk to Dresden house. You do not need to accompany me today. It’s not a far walk and I’d like some time alone.”

“Very well, my lady.” She curtsied. “Have a nice visit.”

Francesca rushed down the stairs and was out of the house before anyone could stop her. She didn’t want to run into her family. She set a brisk pace so she wouldn’t be too late for tea. When she reached the Dresden house, she walked up the front steps and rapped the knocker against the door. After a few brief moments the door opened. The Dresden butler greeted her, “Welcome Lady Francesca. Lady Violet and Lady Iris are waiting for you in the sitting room.”

“Thank you, Barton,” she said and then smiled. “I’ll announce myself.”

He bowed. “As you wish.”

She was a frequent visitor and well acquainted with the household. Francesca rushed into the room and dropped into a chair across from Violet. Iris lounged on the settee. Iris and Violet were fraternal twins. Both had golden blond hair, but Iris had grass green eyes, and Violet sea-green ones.

“We were beginning to wonder if you forgot about us,” Violet said. “Why are you so late?”

Iris poured a cup of tea and fixed it how Francesca liked it, then handed it to her. “Here you go dear. You look as if you need it.”

“I do?” She lifted a brow. Francesca didn’t disagree with her, but she hadn’t realized she gave off that impression.

“Yes,” Violet said and studied her. “You appear a bit piqued. What is going on with you?”

Francesca sighed then took a sip of her tea. This was the difficult part. She had to unburden herself and she hoped they wouldn’t think less of her. Her hand shook a little as she settled the teacup on the saucer. “I need your help.”

“Of course,” Iris said in a calm, reassuring tone. “We will do anything for you.”

She stared at her tea. Where should she start? “Do you recall my family’s Christmastide celebration?”

They had both been there for at least half of the time. This was why she hoped they could help her. Violet nodded. “It was memorable. Why are you asking us this?”

She blew out a breath. Before she told them about her condition she had to know if they knew Matthew’s full identity. “Do you recall a man with ink black hair and deep blue eyes. He had a slight dimple in his left cheek.”

Iris frowned. “Do you mean the Duke of Lindsey?”

“I’m not certain. Do you know his given name?”

Violet tilted her head to the side. “I believe I do. It’s... Matthew. My mother is acquainted with his and once I overheard her complaining about her son and his unwedded state. I believe her words were something to the affect ‘Matthew refuses to marry and provide the dukedom with an heir. There has to be a way to make that rotten boy see reason.’”

“Why do you want to know about the duke?” Iris asked. “I do hope you haven’t set your cap for him. He’s completely against marriage.” There was concern etched through her voice.

She held her hand over her stomach and swallowed the lump in her throat. “Well, I’m going to have to change his mind.” Then she proceeded to explain to them her dilemma. It was one of the hardest things she’d ever done; however, she fully expected telling Matthew, followed by her parents, would be inherently worse. After she was done explaining it to her friends it had helped her to devise a plan. It would be best to contact the duke in private first and hope he would do the honorable thing. If he refused...they’d rethink how he should be approached. With an idea of what she should do Francesca felt truly better for the first time that day. She had to believe it would all be settled soon.



MATTHEW SAT IN THE STUDY AT THE LONDON TOWNHOUSE. IT was inherently more peaceful without his mother constantly

harping on him. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the peace surrounding him. This was the best part of being the Duke of Lindsey. He owned so many properties it was easy enough to find one his mother didn't reside in if necessary. He opened his eyes and smiled. His friend the Marquess of Merrifield leaned against the door frame with an amused grin on his face. His dark hair was quite mussed, and his blue eyes nearly twinkled with mischief. His clothing was disheveled as if he didn't have a valet skilled in keeping his clothing tidy.

"A little birdie informed me you were in town," Merrifield said from the entrance to the study.

He chuckled lightly. "That explains your ragged appearance." Matthew quirked a brow and drawled, "Am I acquainted with this birdie?"

"It's a possibility," Merrifield answered. "She is the more...risqué sort. From what I understood she saw your carriage roll into town while she paid a call on one of her more exclusive clients."

"Would that client happen to be a marquess that resembles you?" Matthew held back a smile. He had a feeling he knew exactly what birdie he referred to.

"I admit nothing." He held up his hand. "Except I do enjoy the more carnal pleasures in life."

"As do I," Matthew agreed. This time he did smile. "How is the fair Esmée?" She was one of London's notorious courtesans. She didn't have many clients, but the ones she did were the amongst the wealthiest, and more elite titles. Matthew used to be amongst them until he had decided she bored him. After that he didn't bed the same woman twice and had become more selective in the ones he did enjoy. He was actually in a bit of a dry spell. Matthew hadn't found a woman

that appealed to him since Christmas. He was having a lot of trouble shaking his need for his red haired Cesca.

“Esmée is doing quite well. She said to tell you she misses you.”

Matthew rolled his eyes. “I bet she does.” She probably missed his money and extravagant gifts. He certainly didn’t miss her. Once he decided to dismiss a lady, he didn’t give them a second chance, and Esmée was no lady. “I however want something a little less used.” That was perhaps a bit crude, but the truth. He was done with whores. Perhaps he could find a nice widow to seduce. That might help him forget Cesca.

“Suit yourself,” Merrifield said. “You usually do.”

“You speak the truth.” Matthew went to the bar near his desk. “Would you care for a brandy?”

“I could drink a glass or two,” Merrifield replied.

Matthew poured them each two fingers of brandy. He handed a snifter to Merrifield and then settled down on one of the mahogany chairs in the study. He sipped on his brandy and enjoyed the burn as it traveled down his throat. “Now tell me why you’re here.”

“I cannot visit a friend without having a reason?”

“No,” Matthew said in a clipped tone. “You have an agenda of some sort. Tell me.”

“It’s nothing.” He sighed. “I’m feeling a bit of ennui.” He settled into the other chair. “Hampstead and Goodland are still at their country seats. I don’t expect they’ll be in town soon and I was relieved to hear you’d returned earlier than expected.” He blew out a breath. “Please tell me that you have some entertainments scheduled.”

He didn't. "My return was rather spontaneous. I have no specific plans." He took another drink of brandy. "I expect if we can discern a spot of fun if we think about it. But not tonight. I want to relax after the journey to town. Come back tomorrow and we will combine our considerable resources toward debauchery and scandal."

Merrifield grinned, then swallowed his brandy in one gulp. "I knew I could count on you." He set his empty glass down. "I'll let you recuperate from your journey. Until tomorrow..." He got up to leave.

When he reached the door. "Merrifield," he called out.

The marquess glanced over his shoulder. "Yes?"

"Next time don't dishonor the brandy. It is meant to be savored. Like you would pleasure a lady. It's best enjoyed in slow succulent measures."

Merrifield laughed. "Not all ladies need that kind of loving. Sometimes a good hard round brings more pleasure than soft kisses and promises that will be broken in the end."

"True enough," he said then grinned. "However, my brandy isn't a whore like you've become accustomed to."

Merrifield's laughter echoed back at him as he walked down the hall and left Matthew on his own. Now that he was alone again, he'd find that peace he desperately needed.

Three



The visit with Violet and Iris had gone well. Francesca had a plan. It wasn't necessarily guaranteed to be successful, but at least she had something to work toward. Matthew would be surprised. Probably not about his impending fatherhood... The more she learned about the depraved duke she'd begun to wonder what she'd seen in him that night. He'd been so charming, but that was part of his act. He acted as if the woman he kissed and loved was the only one that made his heart beat. It had been...effective. Francesca had fallen for every word, every touch, and every single insincere promise.

And if he tossed her aside, she'd be ruined forever...

Not that she wasn't already, but at least if he did the honorable thing no one had to know about her indiscretion. She did not have a good feeling about what he might do. Francesca fully believed he'd laugh at her and show her the door. If he even allowed her inside his home...

She swallowed hard. No matter how terrified she felt she could not let that stop her from trying. She had made the decision to be with him and confronting him was part of those consequences. Francesca intended to do that after dark. Once her parents retired for the evening she'd sneak out and walk to his townhouse. As luck would have it, he lived nearby or at

least the townhouse he owned in London was on the same street. She couldn't be certain he was in town, but she hoped her luck, at least in telling him about the baby, held. Everything else had not been so fortuitous.

"You're not eating," her mother said. "Are you still a little under the weather?"

Francesca pushed around the potatoes on her plate. She'd been wishing dinner was over so she could excuse herself. "I am not hungry." She smiled hoping it eased her mother's concern. "I think I'm over whatever ailed me earlier." And she was...at least until morning. She had a feeling her sickness would be back. Francesca had to find a way to hide that from her parents. Her mother would discern the truth about her condition if the entire household was aware, she became sick each morning. That was another reason to see the duke as soon as possible. Matthew had to take responsibly. Just had to... If he didn't, she'd have to face her parents and accept her reputation was in tatters.

"I hope so. Your maid said you were miserable. I'm glad you didn't suffer too long with it." Her mother picked up her glass of wine and sipped. "Perhaps you would like to accompany me on a visit to the modiste. We can order you some more gowns."

"I don't need any new gowns." At least not yet... When she grew rounder, she'd have to get some new ones. "I might visit Aunt Elizabeth. Didn't she arrive in town today?" Her aunt had a gift of sight too, and if Matthew turned her away, she might need some guidance. "and Adeline should be here soon too with her new husband."

"I have some business to discuss with your Uncle Jack," her father told her. "You can ride over with me if you want."

I'm going early though."

She didn't know how much sleep she'd manage after her visit with Matthew, but a ride with her father would be preferable than walking. "That would be lovely," Francesca replied. "I'll have Bess wake me early enough to accompany you."

Dinner seemed to go on forever, but it did eventually come to an end. Francesca excused herself and went to her bedchambers. She didn't ring for Bess. She'd told her maid earlier not to come up and to take the night off. When she'd dressed for dinner, she had Bess help her into a gown that didn't require stays and buttoned up the front. She had to be able to undress herself after she returned home, and she didn't want her maid to grow suspicious. This way Bess was grateful for an evening to herself and didn't question it. Especially as it wasn't the first time, she'd done something similar in the past.

Francesca paced her bedchamber until she thought it was safe enough to sneak off. She grabbed her cloak, donned it, then pulled the hood up over her head. She went down the servants' stairs and out the back door. The servants had all retired for the evening. There was a slight chance her parents were still awake, and she didn't want to risk going out the front door. She walked down the street quickly. Francesca glanced back several times. Her heart raced heavily as she moved toward Matthew's townhouse.

Finally, she reached the door. She stared at it uncertain what to do next. The duke wouldn't answer his own door. He'd have servants for that, and what if they turned her away? There was always that possibility and she should have considered it. Francesca took a deep breath and then went up the stairs. When she reached the door, she lifted the knocker

and rapped it three times against the door. She held her breath and waited for it to open. Several seconds went by and she blew out that breath when the door creaked open.

She was shocked to her core when Matthew actually opened the door. Her mouth fell open and she couldn't speak for so long it seemed as if time had frozen still. His dark hair was disheveled, and his eyes had a glassy appearance to them. He lifted a brow. "Go ahead and speak I don't have all night."

Francesca found her composure and lowered the hood of her cloak. Surprise filled his eyes, but it was brief. She lifted her gaze to meet his and boldly said, "Your Grace, let me come inside."

She didn't think he'd let her inside, but then he held the door open wider. Francesca slid past him into his foyer. Now the hard part would begin...



MATTHEW DIDN'T KNOW WHY SHE WAS AT HIS HOME, AND PART of him had thought he'd imagined her; however, he couldn't be happier she'd found him. Perhaps it was time to have her a second time and erase her from his mind once and for all. She'd been haunting him for too long.

He shut the door and turned to her. Matthew lifted his lips into a sensual smile. "Why hello, Cesca."

"So, you remember me?" She tilted her head to the side. "I had wondered if you would, considering your lecherous habits." She didn't sound at all happy to see him...which only proved to confuse him further.

Damn if she wasn't even more beautiful than he remembered though. Her strawberry blonde hair glowed in the candlelight, a few strands had come loose from the plait, and her blue eyes had fire in them. She was angry. That only made her more appealing to him. "How could I forget you." He stalked forward. "It was bold of you to seek me out at home. Normally that would be something I'd find unforgiveable, but with you I'm willing to make an exception."

He needed her naked and moaning underneath him. Their one night together had been too fast, and she had been mostly clothed. He could rectify that mistake now. Perhaps that was why he couldn't forget her. Matthew hadn't had ample opportunity to taste every inch of her delectable skin. He wanted to kiss her until she screamed his name, then he'd plunge inside of her and ride her until she screamed it again.

Bloody hell he was hard already. He might have to keep her with him all night. Once wasn't going to be enough. Matthew would need hours with her to get his fill. He studied her as she did the same with him. What was the chit after?

"I do not care if you find my presence unforgivable or not," she replied scathingly. "If I had a choice, I wouldn't be here at all. The sight of you makes me sick, but then again, a lot does these days."

"I'm afraid I'm not following you." He quirked a brow. "If you don't wish to see me, why are you here?"

She did seem rather irate. There was a little pink in her cheeks, and her hands were fisted at her sides. Matthew was glad he'd given his staff the night off. He'd done it when he'd had other ideas for the night, but those had fallen through. Since she was always on his mind, the whores he'd hoped to use to forget her were supposed to spend the evening with

him. Matthew had sent them away before they could even really begin. He couldn't get hard for them, but his lovely Cesca stepped in front of him, and he'd been ready to rut for hours. What the blazes was wrong with him?

"Why did you never pay a call on me?" Her lips wobbled a little as she spoke. "After that night..." She shook her head. "I thought you wanted more with me. I realize now it was a foolish girl's hopes, but I want you to tell me. I need to hear it."

"Ah," he said softly. "I should have expected this." He sighed. "Why don't we go into the sitting room. We shouldn't stand in the foyer conversing."

Matthew didn't know what to tell her. The trek to the sitting room was his way of stalling the inevitable. Perhaps he could find some pretty words to tell her. When he'd started to kiss her, he'd discovered her sweetness, and suspected her innocence, but couldn't stop himself. He'd wanted her like he had never wanted anything in his entire life, and he didn't regret that night. She was a siren to him.

She followed him into the sitting room, and then he gestured for her to sit on the settee. He debated if he should sit next to her or in the chair. If he sat beside her, she would prove too much of a temptation. He'd kiss her and then they'd be exactly where they were now. Matthew decided to sit in the chair. It was for the best. She seemed distraught and he didn't want to add to it. If she joined him in his bed again, he wanted it to be her decision. He wouldn't seduce her this time.

"So?" She folded her hands in her lap. "Tell me."

"I..." How did he say this without making everything worse? "I should apologize. I could say some pretty words and make excuses, but the truth is there is none. I don't get

involved with women more than one night. It's how it's always been."

"And you believe that makes it all right?" She pursed her lips in displeasure. "You use women because you believe they are there for your pleasure. Do you not consider the consequences of the blatant disregard you have for females?"

He sighed. God help him. Matthew hated confrontations with women. They could be so hysterical and trying. Though most of them demanded money. Thankfully, he had plenty and he could hand it to them and wave them off. None of them had ever returned again. Though admittedly until Cesca they'd all been servants, or women of ill repute. He had never dallied with anyone of quality. That should have said something to him and explained a little why he couldn't forget about her. "I've never left a woman unsatisfied." He tilted his lips upward into an arrogant half-smile. "In or out of bed."

"I wouldn't know," she retorted. "We never shared a bed." Cesca looked at him from top to bottom. "And out of one I can honestly say I've been quite disappointed."

Matthew chuckled. She was perfect, and he would have her naked and underneath him. She didn't realize it, but she'd just challenged him, and he never backed down from one before, and he wouldn't start with her. "I can rectify that."

"Charming," she said. So much sarcasm filled that one word it was razor sharp as if it might draw blood as it slid out of her mouth. "But I am afraid I must decline your offer. I didn't come here for a repeat performance. The last time was a mistake, and I have the unwelcome gift you left to prove it." She held her hand over her stomach, and it was like she punched him in his. Nothing could have shocked him more. He had to have mistaken her intent. She couldn't be...

Four



So many emotions crossed over his face as he took in her words. It was almost entertaining to watch. First shock, then denial, followed quickly by anger. His cheeks were now flushed a bright red, and his hands had curled into fists. Francesca didn't think he'd hurt her, but she couldn't be certain. She prayed she hadn't made a mistake coming to see him alone.

"I don't believe you," he said in a defiant tone. "Whatever you are hoping to gain by lying to me now...it will not work. You can crawl back under the hole you were buried in. I am not claiming any brat you might be carrying. If you are enceinte, and I doubt you are, it is not my child."

Francesca sighed. She wished she had expected a different response, but she hadn't. A man who seduced an innocent girl and then abandoned her would not take responsibility for his actions. She really had a terrible judge of character, and the bad taste to fall in love with a reprobate. The sad truth was she did indeed still harbor feelings for him. She wished she didn't but for whatever reason her stubborn heart wouldn't let go of hope he felt the same way about her.

"Hole?" She lifted a brow. "You think I am some poor relation that everyone takes pity on." Francesca stood and

faced him. “Why would you ever believe such a thing? As if I’m not worthy of your, or anyone’s attention.” Anger pierced her soul and she never wanted to punch a person as much as she did him. “This child, and much to my dismay, yes, there is one growing inside of me...is *yours*.” She emphasized that last word. “I cannot make you accept that, but it is the truth.”

He seemed a bit flummoxed. “You were dirty and had paint in your hair that day.”

“So that made you assume I was...less?” She might give in to the urge to hit him. “Even if I had been that is no way to treat a woman. There were consequences, and there is a price for that spot of pleasure we found together.” It hurt so damn much to say that aloud. Facing him was so hard and she kept fighting the urge to cry. She refused to let him see her hurting so much. “What makes you believe you have the right to use women as your personal toys?” The more she learned disgust filled her. This was the man she’d foolishly fell in love with?

“Because they let me,” he said in an irritable tone. “And you were no different, and still aren’t, than all the ones that came before you.” He sneered at her and his disrespect for her gender flowed through his voice. “You want my title and nothing more.”

“I didn’t know your title when you seduced me.” She glared at him. Francesca *would* hit him before she left. “And I didn’t know it until earlier today. It never mattered to me. I’m not impressed with a dukedom.”

“Another lie,” he said casually. He honestly didn’t believe her. “Why else were you there that night? A duke’s Christmas party?”

She laughed hysterically. Francesca had never gotten around to telling him about her family connections. He had

wondered how often she'd visited Seabrook. She'd never mentioned her grandfather was the Duke of Weston or that her father would inherit that title one day. That Christmastide house party had been at her Aunt Elizabeth's house...the Duchess of Whitewood. In short, Francesca was surrounded by the aristocracy, and high-ranking titles. She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. "We're a fine pair." She managed to get her laughter under control. "Neither one of us were aware of who each other were. I'm a fool." She met his gaze and told him, "But you, Your Grace, are a bigger one."

"I doubt that." His tone was nonchalant and dismissive. "I'm not the one about to be ruined forever."

"Keep telling yourself that, but you're wrong." She leaned forward as if sharing a secret. "My father and grandfather will ruin you, and if that doesn't work, my uncle will. He used to be a pirate after all."

He blanched at her words. It might be just occurring to him who she was related to. The rumors of Uncle Jack's pirating days were truth, but no one really believed them. "Those are just words. They cannot touch me."

"Because you are a duke?" She grinned with malice shining through her eyes. "It's all right if you do not believe me. I decided you're not worthy of me or my child. I can find someone far better than you." Francesca came to her feet preparing to leave. "But I want you to know one thing...I do not forgive you, and I will be honest with my family now that we've spoken. They will not take this slight lightly."

"I do not care," he said in a flippant tone.

"You will," she promised him. "Because my grandfather is the Duke of Weston and he has far more sway than you ever will." Francesca strolled over to him and leaned down to

whisper in his ear. “My father is the Marquess of Blackthorn, and yes, my uncle is the Duke of Whitewood.” She stood straight and then tilted her lips upward into a wicked smile. Two could play this game. “You, Your Grace, are now on borrowed time. Enjoy what you have left.”

With those words she left him alone to consider his choices. She wouldn't tell her father...yet. He'd call the duke out or something worse. Francesca didn't want to marry him, but it was the best solution for her and the baby. They could maintain separate lives after. If he didn't make an offer for her by the day after her comeout ball, then she'd tell her family.



MATTHEW SAT FOR A VERY LONG TIME IN HIS SITTING ROOM after she'd left. He had thought she was high born, but he hadn't realized how connected the chit was, and now he found himself in quite a mess.

He should offer for the girl. It was the right thing to do, and he might not find himself dead after her family came after him. She was right about Whitewood. That one had a look in his eyes that said he'd exact retribution and not think twice about it. Winchester had compromised Whitewood's daughter, and now he was married to that chit. They would expect the same from Matthew.

Bloody hell...

Cursing and wishing he could change what he'd done wouldn't help him. He'd told everyone that would listen he'd never marry, and he didn't want to now. Even if she carried his child, he didn't want to tie himself to her forever.

His child...

Something about the idea of his baby growing inside her did odd things to him. He wanted to see her belly get round as his child flourished. He'd already been fascinated by her, but now? He wanted her even more. She'd been so defiant, and bold as she spoke to him. His cock had hardened even more when she dressed him down for the fool he was, and she had been right about that too—he was the biggest arse in existence. He'd never admit it to her though. Matthew should have known about her connections. Most of the guests at that house party had been related in some fashion. Even if she'd been a distant cousin the Duke of Whitewood would not have appreciate Matthew seducing her.

Matthew should never have let her go. He hadn't wanted to believe her, but if she was expecting, the child had to be his. She didn't seem the type to fall into bed with many men. Before he made a decision, he would have to learn more about her. Matthew would not make the same mistake twice. He couldn't allow her to take advantage of him. If his Cesca was telling the truth, his mother would be very happy. Matthew would be able to present her with his duchess and an heir on the way. In many ways that also appealed to him. He could marry her and then dump her with his mother. If his luck held out, she'd have a boy and he'd never have to see her again.

The more time he had to consider it he liked that idea. He would pay a call on the Archbishop and apply for a special license. Matthew believed in being prepared. If he had to marry her, he would have to do it soon. She might start showing soon and that wouldn't do. His duchess had to be above reproach, and he would ensure she stayed that way.

He stood and went up to his chambers. Matthew would need a bath and his best clothes if he planned on visiting the Archbishop. He'd have to bribe the holy man with a lot of funds, but it would be worth it to secure the license. They wouldn't have time to wait. Cesca should have come to him sooner. Perhaps he was being too hard on her there. How could she have? They hadn't been forthcoming with their names. She had probably had to discover his identity and it had cost them both precious time.

He pulled the bell for his valet. "Have a bath drawn." Matthew told him when he arrived in his bedchamber.

"Now?" his valet asked. There was a little bit of shock in the man's tone. Matthew couldn't blame him. He didn't often ask for a bath in the middle of the night. Actually, he didn't believe he ever had before.

Matthew grinned. It was late but he didn't plan on sleeping. He had much to do and not a lot of time to accomplish it all. "Yes, now," he ordered.

"Very well, Your Grace," he bowed and then left to accomplish the task he'd been assigned.

He would have to ask permission to marry her. She hadn't told her family yet about her condition. If she had then it would have been her father, and possibly other men in her family, that had paid a call on him. He could use that to his advantage. It would be better if he had a ring on her finger before they discovered they had anticipated their wedding vows. Once she was his they couldn't do much.

"Your bath is ready," his valet announced.

"Perfect," Matthew said. He'd had a lot to drink, and the bath would help him to clear his head. "Have my clothes

pressed. I'm to meet with the Archbishop at dawn." And after that he'd pay a call on Merrifield. He would need a witness at his wedding. "And tell the stablemaster to have my horse ready to depart before my meeting." He should perhaps take a carriage, but a horse would be quicker.

"I'll see to it," the valet answered and left him to his bath.

Matthew settled into the water and leaned back into the tub. He closed his eyes and absorbed the warmth. He was going to be a father. Him. The rogue duke... The ton would be all aflutter with gossip once his marriage was announced. He wasn't certain who would be more surprised: his friends, his mother, or society. Either way, it was the most entertainment he'd had in ages.

Cesca probably thought they were done. She would be in for quite the shock when he paid a call on her. Matthew looked forward to that exchange. Would she be polite or rude? He hoped she'd be rude. He liked it when she thought she had the upper hand. He could not wait to prove her wrong, but what he really wanted was to make her his. He needed her in his bed, at least one more time, and maybe then he could finally erase her from his mind. Matthew prayed that an entire night of her beneath him, living every fantasy he had of her, would be enough.

Five



The sun was high in the sky and warmed Francesca's skin. She held her parasol over her head to block the light from blinding her and overheating her already strained body. She had somehow managed to hide her sickness and crawl out of bed that morning. For some reason her child had decided to take pity on her, at least for one day. She hadn't lost the contents of her stomach, but nausea still filled her. Francesca had skipped breakfast and went to the library to read. Her ball was later that night, and she should be resting. Instead, she was walking in Hyde Park with Violet and Iris. She could not take the chance anyone in her family might overhear what they discussed.

"What did the roguish duke have to say for himself?" Violet asked.

If only she'd know his moniker before she'd fallen into his arms... Francesca sighed. She wouldn't have realized it that night regardless. He hadn't told her his full name. She should have insisted, but she'd been too taken with him. "He denies responsibility."

"Of course, he did," Iris replied, disgust evident in her tone. "He isn't the type that would. Without telling her why I wanted to know anything about him I asked Lady Calliope

Andrews. I acted as if I might be interested in him myself.” She shuddered a little. “Her brother is one of the duke’s closest friends. She has socialized with him often.”

“What did she have to say?” Francesca couldn’t help her curiosity.

“Not much that we do not already know.” Iris frowned. “She believes he had his heart broken once and it has soured him ever since.”

“Did he?” She nibbled on her bottom lip. It might explain why he acted the way he did. Still, she couldn’t let him treat her as if she were nothing. He had no respect for her or her predicament. She carried his child and he had been far too blasé about the situation. Somehow, he had refrained from physically hitting him; however, she did believe she dealt a much harder blow when she dropped her family name. “Do you know who he supposedly loved?” It did hurt a little to believe he might have had feelings for someone else. The same sort she still had for him and he’d done his best to crush out of existence.

Iris shook her head. “No,” she said. “All she could say was she overheard a conversation between her brother, the Earl of Hampstead, and the duke. Lord Hampstead had been berating him about his broken heart, and how he let it rule his decisions.”

“How long ago was this?” Violet asked. “I have difficulty believing he has carried these feelings for years. He’s been a rogue for quite a while now. Mama keeps telling me to steer clear of him while she still carries avarice in her eyes about the very idea of having a duchess for a daughter.”

“On one hand she doesn’t want a scandal,” Iris began. “And the other is wondering if one of us could turn his gaze

long enough to lure him down the aisle.” She chuckled lightly. “That’s what most of the marriage minded mama’s have on their agenda. Ours is no different.”

“Except Fran’s mother.” Violet frowned. “She never pressures you, and she might be the one to have a duchess for a daughter.”

“Mother doesn’t care for society rules.” Francesca blew out a breath. “And one day she’ll be a duchess herself. Why should she bother with pushing me toward a specific title? She would rather I found love than a title he can hold over the heads of the matriarchs.”

“That is one of the reasons I adore your mother,” Iris said. “She has a reasonable outlook on life. I do wish our mother could follow her lead.” She nibbled on her bottom lip. “This will be our second season, and if we don’t make a match she’ll despair. Two unmarried daughters apparently are the cause for tremendous anxiety...at least for our mother.”

“I’d gladly give you my current dilemma in exchange. Either the duke will have to agree to marry me or I’m going to have to find a different suitor, and fast. I’m going to be ruined if I don’t find a husband.”

“Speaking of the devil...” Violet gestured toward a pair of horses that entered the promenade. One was the duke, and darn it, he looked so handsome it nearly took Francesca’s breath away.

“The gentleman with him looks familiar.” Francesca said absentmindedly. She didn’t care who the other man was because all she really saw was Matthew.

“That is the Marquess of Merrifield,” Iris told her. “He’s the one Violet has her cap set for, but he never notices her.”

“I do not,” Violet protested. Francesca glanced in her direction. Was Iris correct? Did Vi have feelings for the marquess. “He probably looks familiar because he was at the Christmas house party too. All the scandalous gentlemen were.”

“Scandalous gentlemen?” Francesca lifted a brow. “There were five, but one fell in love at the house party. He married your cousin, Adeline.”

“The Earl of Winchester?” Francesca asked. “Who are the others besides the marquess?”

“Your duke is one.” Iris grinned. “They are the unattainable gentleman. Every lady hopes to win their heart, but they have other plans, and none of them include marriage. Instead, they leave scandals in their wake.”

“Hence the nickname,” Violet said. “The other two are Viscount Goodland and Earl Hampstead. We mentioned him earlier.”

“Well, they certainly look good on their mounts,” Francesca said as she stared in their direction. “It’s a pity they’re morally corrupt.”

Matthew turned in her direction and then glanced at her. The moment he realized she was there she should have turned and gone in the opposite direction. She didn’t though. Francesca didn’t want to need him; however, she also realized a woman in her position couldn’t have the luxury of ignoring him. He motioned for his horse to walk toward her, and his friend followed. Francesca smiled. If her friend did have feelings for the marquess she hoped Violet would forgive her. She was about to flirt outrageously with him in an attempt to make Matthew jealous.



MATTHEW COULDN'T BELIEVE HIS LUCK. HE HAD A MARRIAGE license secured, and now his bride-to-be was in the park. He still had to learn some more about her, but he could visit a little with her. It would help him to make a decision. He hadn't yet told Merrifield he planned to marry her or that he had a special license. He was about to tell him about his impending fatherhood, or the possibility of it when he caught sight of her. He could tell Merrifield everything later.

"Where are we going?" Merrifield asked, surprised at their detour.

"I see a lady I must speak with," Matthew said. "It shouldn't take long." Cesca didn't appear too pleased to see him, but he could change her mind. Their conversation last night hadn't ended on a pleasant note, but he'd had time to consider everything. Matthew couldn't let her go, and she'd know that soon enough.

He stopped when he reached Francesca and the other two ladies by her side. Matthew dismounted, then bowed. "Lady Francesca," he greeted. "How fortuitous to find you here."

"Is it?" she lifted a brow mocking him. "Somehow I do not find it so."

Merrifield, who had dismounted when Matthew did, chuckled. "I do believe I like you." He bowed. "I'm Lord Merrifield. Who might you be?"

Cesca turned toward him and tilted her lips upward into a sensuous smile that Matthew wished she had bestowed on him. Why was she looking at Merrifield that way? If she

didn't stop soon, he'd have to murder his friend. "I am Lady Francesca Kendall." She gestured toward the other two women with her. "This is Lady Violet Keene, and her sister Lady Iris Keene. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance Lord Merrifield."

"The pleasure is all mine," Merrifield said in a husky tone. Matthew recognized the shift in his voice. He found Cesca attractive, and at the first opportunity he would discover why that was a bad idea. "Are you enjoying your walk in the park?"

"I am," Cesca said, focusing all her attention on Merrifield. "Would you care to walk with me?"

The hell? "He wouldn't," Matthew said through gritted teeth. He handed the reins to his horse to Merrifield and then turned back to her. "However, I would." He looped her arm with his and forced her to walk with him. He left her companions and Merrifield alone. When they were some distance away, he turned his attention to her. "What games are you trying to play?"

"I'm not the one playing," she said. "Your friend seems nice enough and more worthy of my attention."

Cesca was still angry with him. He would have to soothe her ruffled feathers. He'd been with plenty of angry women. She was no different. "Merrifield is a rake, and you would do well to steer clear of him." He hadn't meant to say that. Bloody hell. What was wrong with him?

She burst into laughter. "And how is that different than you?"

"Matty?" A female said in a throaty purr. "Is that you?"

Matthew stilled. There was only one woman that had ever called him that, and he had hoped to never see her again.

Slowly he turned his gaze to meet hers. “Countess Briarton,” he said in a cool tone.

“How lovely to see you.” She turned her attention to Francesca. “And who is this? A sweetheart? I thought you no longer believed in love.” Edith Whitcomb...now the dowager countess of Briarton was as beautiful, and as poisonous as Matthew remembered.

“You do not know me and never did.” He hated her and probably always would. He wanted to tell her that despite what she might believe he did not live his life to spite her; however, he couldn’t. She had ruined his life and made it impossible for him to believe in love, or that a woman might be telling the truth. It was because of her he’d been so horrid to Cesca. He owned his actions, but he couldn’t help wondering who he’d be if not for Edith. He didn’t introduce them. He didn’t want Edith’s poison to touch Cesca or their child. “Now if you’ll excuse us, we were enjoying our walk.”

“Who is she?” Cesca asked quietly.

“No one of importance,” he said quickly. “She is nothing.”

“Now who’s lying?” She shook her head. The disgust in her tone was unmistakable. “You like to claim it is me, but we both know the truth. Is she right? Are you incapable of love?”

“That is not what she said.” That evil woman was already ruining his life again. “She said she thought I no longer believed in love.”

“I see,” she said quietly. “Because you used to love her and no longer do? Or is it because she still holds a piece of your heart and you hate her for it?”

“I do not love that woman.” His tone was a bit harsh, but his feelings toward Edith were not congenial. He didn’t want

Cesca to think he cared one bit for Edith. “She’s not to be trusted.”

“Like all women?” She lifted a brow. “I understand.”

Matthew didn’t think she did. She was staring at him with pity in her eyes, and he did not like it. This walk was not supposed to go like this. She was supposed to fall into his arms, and he could tell her they’d marry soon. Instead, she’d paid more attention to Merrifield than him, and then Edith had to walk back into his life at the most inopportune time. “What exactly do you think you understand?”

“She broke your heart, and you decided that you never wanted to feel that pain again.” She sounded intensely sad as she spoke. “It led you to believe breaking mine didn’t mean anything. She ruined a part of you, and I cannot allow you to do the same to me.” She shook her head. “And that’s why it’s best we part now. We will only make each other miserable, and I refuse to become bitter like you.”

She broke free and walked back to her friends. Matthew let her because she had stunned him with her observation. Was she right? Had he broken her heart the way Edith had his? If so, how could he ever make it right with her?

Six



It was a lovely night, and Francesca couldn't have asked for a better one for her comeout ball. This was her official launch into society, and it would be the last time. She had to accept the truth. Her pregnancy guaranteed she would never be accepted in polite society again. They would snub her, and her child. She'd made her decision and she had to live with it. Her only regret was for her baby. The innocent life growing inside her had never done anything wrong, and he or she certainly hadn't asked for the challenges life would bring.

She wished Matthew had been someone she could depend on. He'd proved to her that he was not a worthy risk. Marrying him would have simplified everything, but it would not have made it all better. He had some demons of his own to face, and she could not be his saving grace. She could barely take care of herself, and she had to think about more than what was best for her. Francesca still wasn't certain she'd made the best choice. She might be miserable with Matthew, but her baby wouldn't have the stigma of being a bastard.

The ballroom was filled to capacity. She was the granddaughter of a duke, and no one had refused an invitation. There would be plenty of gentlemen in attendance. If she had more time perhaps she could convince one of them to marry her. Her dance card was already almost full. Instead of

wallowing in self-pity she'd decided to embrace the night. She stood at the edge of the ballroom waiting for her next dance partner. She didn't recall his name and didn't care to. All she could recall was his title, a viscount, no an earl... It didn't matter. He was currently walking toward her with a smile on his face.

Francesca tilted her lips upward hoping that she appeared happy to see him. She needed a break. The ball wasn't as fun as she'd hoped, and it failed to distract her from her dilemma. The entire night had become tedious faster than she could have imagined.

She curtsied when he arrived at her side. "My lord," she greeted. She determined that was a safe enough greeting. "I'm ready for our dance."

"I am glad." He grinned. "But can I interest you in a stroll instead? It's become a bit hot in here."

Francesca did not want to stroll, but as she didn't want to dance either she didn't see any reason to turn him away. "I could use some fresh air." That at least was the truth.

"Then let's go out on the balcony." He led her to the balcony doors. It was nearly as crowded as the ballroom, but there was some lovely light from the moon to illuminate it. She would have preferred the private balcony, but not with him. Perhaps she would escape there after she was done with her allotted time with him. She had another dance partner after him and would have to excuse herself.

"It is a nice night." She sounded like an imbecile. Francesca had nothing to say to him, and quite lost altogether. It was a good thing she was no longer hoping to secure a good match. She would have failed miserably in her endeavor.

“Indeed,” he agreed. “It appears spring has finally decided to make an appearance.”

He didn’t sound all that intelligent either. Perhaps this was how courtships began... Francesca had no experience to fall back on. When she’d first met Matthew, they hadn’t talked this way with each other. It had seemed more natural. This exchange...was wrong. She wanted to escape and never be forced to converse with him again. Which wasn’t exactly fair, but it was how she felt.

“We should go back inside,” she said abruptly. “I have a partner for the next dance.”

“Very well,” he agreed. She couldn’t tell if he was happy to hand her off to someone else or upset he didn’t have more time with her. Either way she was just glad to be done with it.

She breathed a sigh of relief when he left her at the edge of the ballroom to wait for her partner. The gentleman in question was nowhere that she could see. Perhaps she had escaped the impending dance and she could go to the private balcony for a little while.

“You look a little lost,” a woman said.

Francesca turned toward her and wished she hadn’t. Then she might have been able to ignore her. Now she would be forced to converse with Lady Briarton, the woman who had broken Matthew’s heart. “Not at all,” she said. “I can hardly be lost in a room I’ve been familiar with all my life.” She hated her. She was the reason Matthew could never really love her.

“You do realize he’ll never love you,” she said in a callous tone. “His heart belongs to me.”

Was she reading Francesca’s mind? How could she be so cruel? More importantly, did Matthew still love her? “I don’t

know what you mean.” She would not feed into her beliefs.

“There’s no reason to act as if you’re unaware of who I speak of,” she said in a conspiratorial tone. “I saw the way you looked at him in the park. It’s clear you have fallen hard for him. It’s best you give up that fantasy. I intend to have him again, and I will not think twice about stomping on you to do so. Don’t make the mistake of underestimating me.”

“Trust me, I don’t.” Lady Briarton was a conniving, selfish, harpy that didn’t deserve happiness, or to have what she wanted. As mad as she was at Matthew, even he didn’t deserve the likes of her. “And you’re welcome to him...if he’ll have you.”

With those words she strolled away from her. She wanted to stomp away in anger, but that would have given Lady Briarton something to sneer after. Instead, she slipped out of the ballroom and went toward the private balcony. She needed a little time alone.



MATHEW HAD OVERHEARD THE CONVERSATION BETWEEN EDITH and Francesca. He wasn’t certain how he felt about it. He wanted to go after Francesca, and he would, but first he had to let Edith know she could go to hell. He would never take her back.

“Edith,” he said coolly from behind her. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s the ball to be at tonight. Why wouldn’t I be here?”

“Shouldn’t you be in mourning?” he lifted a brow. “Didn’t that old man you married die a month ago?”

She laughed, and it had an almost evil quality to it. He wondered what he had ever seen in her. She was beautiful, but there was nothing of substance inside her. “No one expects me to act the loving widow. Everyone knows I married him for his title.”

Of course, she had. After she failed to get Matthew to the altar, she’d married the old man. Her reputation was in tatters and she had to do something to repair it. She was also penniless, and the old earl had given her a generous purse. “I suppose that is true.” He leaned down and when he was next to her ear he said, “Go home. You’re not welcome here.”

“Do not be ridiculous. I have an invitation.”

He lifted a brow. “I doubt that very much. The Marchioness of Blackthorn would not have sent an invite to a widow of less than a month. I think it is more likely you came with someone that did have one. Go find the fool you convinced to bring you, and leave, or I will have you removed.”

“Matthew,” she said in a sulky tone. “Is that anyway to talk to the woman you declared you would love forever? We can be together now.”

“I was a foolish boy,” he said in a dismissive tone. “I had no idea what real love was, and if I did, it died that day. I do not love you and we will never be together again. You are nothing to me.” He stood straight and searched the ballroom. His Cesca had left. No matter, he’d find her. “Now do I have to force you to leave or are you going to exit willingly?”

“All right I’ll leave,” she agreed. “But this isn’t over.”

“It is,” he said in a firm tone. “and if you ever harass Lady Francesca again, I’ll see you ruined, and unwelcome in society. She’s to be my wife and I protect what’s mine.”

She laughed. “Does the little bird know of your intentions?” She lifted a brow. “She didn’t seem to care if you want her or not.”

Matthew ignored her barb. It hit too close to the heart. He’d handled everything wrong with Cesca, and it was up to him to see it righted. Matthew would marry her, and once she was his wife, he’d have plenty of time to make it up to her. The hard part was gaining her agreement. “You know nothing.” He turned on his heels and left her alone. She’d leave if she knew what was good for her.

Matthew left the ballroom and went exploring the Weston townhouse. He’d been there before for balls, and admittedly found a few quiet areas to have some time alone with a lady or two. That was all part of his past. Francesca was his future, and he’d prove that to her. Where would she have gone?

He doubted she would have gone to her bedchamber or the lady’s retiring room. She seemed as if she wanted to be alone. Perhaps the library? There wasn’t a conservatory there. She could have gone to the private balcony. There were stairs on that one that led to the garden. She liked plants or he believed she did... It was a place to start.

He turned down a hall and then walked to the end of it, then slipped through a door. It was a small room off the balcony. He crossed over it to the doors to the balcony and stepped outside. She wasn’t on the balcony, but that did not mean she hadn’t gone out there. He went to the railing and glanced down. There was enough light from the moon to

illuminate the garden. She sat on a bench near some rose bushes with her head tilted upward as if she were stargazing.

Matthew went down the stairs and headed toward her. When he reached her, she glanced at him and frowned. “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you.” He tilted his lips upward. “We need to talk.”

She scowled at him. “You’re going to ruin my night, aren’t you?”

He wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her. How could he have stayed away from her for so long. She was perfect, and the exact opposite of Edith. He’d been a fool for far too long. Mathew had made so many mistakes and it would take a while to correct them all. Some he might never be able to fix. “I hope not,” he said earnestly. “Will you listen to what I have to say?”

“Shouldn’t you go after Lady Briarton?” She lifted a brow. “Apparently she’s ready to have you in her bed, or perhaps she hopes for marriage this time.”

“She always wanted marriage,” he said, then sighed. “She used me, and I was happy to let her. I don’t want her, and for a long time I didn’t want anyone.” He sat beside her and lifted her hand into his. “I do want you, and I always have. I was too afraid to trust my own judgement or know what I felt. Please let me have another chance with you. If not for me, then for our child. The baby deserves everything we both can give him.”

She lifted a brow. “Are you certain it’s a boy then?”

“That would make my mother happy.” He grinned. “She wants an heir.” Matthew shook his head. “No, I’m not certain

of anything. I only want to make you and our child happy. Please let me do that.”

She glanced away from him and was silent for several heartbeats. “What do you want from me?”

“Marry me,” he said. “I have a special license and we can do the ceremony immediately. It’s the best solution.”

Cesca closed her eyes and then said in a quiet tone, “All right I’ll marry you.” Then she stood. “But I don’t want to see you anymore tonight. This is my last night as an unmarried lady, and I’m going to enjoy it.” With those words she turned and walked away from him.

Matthew had won this battle, but the war was far from over. She had agreed to marry him, but it was clear she didn’t accept there could be more between them than the baby they’d already created. He had a lot to make up for, and somehow convince her that they might find happiness together. If only he knew how to do that...

Seven



She still could not believe she had agreed to marry him. It was a good decision even if she felt as if she'd crumble at the slightest provocation. Her baby deserved to be born inside the bonds of matrimony. The child was innocent of any wrongdoing. If anyone should pay a price it should be her, or Matthew. It didn't matter that he never said he loved her. He claimed to want her and that would have to be enough.

If she wasn't already carrying his child, she might have held out for more. She didn't have the luxury to wait for love. Perhaps over time, after they were married, he would come to love her. Fool that she was she already loved him. Francesca had since they first met. Something had snapped into place when she met him, and it had stayed with her.

He hadn't said when the wedding would take place or where. She should go to see him and discuss it, but she couldn't find the motivation to do so. It was as if once she did it would become more of a reality. Francesca was taking the cowardly way and waiting for him to come to her or contact her in some fashion.

"Lady Francesca," the butler said. "This just arrived for you."

He held a bouquet of flowers—a mix of wisteria and violets. They were beautiful and extravagant. They had to be from Matthew. Francesca hadn't even tried to connect with any of the gentleman from her ball. Her only regret was that she'd never danced with Matthew. She should have insisted he signed her card, but she'd been too shocked by his proposal. He hadn't seemed inclined to offer for her when she'd told him about her condition, and in the park, he'd been too consumed with his former love's presence.

“Can you set them on the table for me?” she said.

“Of course,” the butler agreed. He set the blooms on the table and then turned to her. “This came with them.” It was a missive. “There was no card.” He handed it to her, and then left her alone.

She tore open the missive.

MY DEAREST CESCA,

APOLOGIES ARE NOT ENOUGH, AND I ONLY PRAY IN OUR LIFETIME I can make things right with you. These flowers remind me of the color of your eyes in the midst of passion, they're not merely blue, but is mixed with all the shades of purple...much like a tempest about to explode upon the earth. You stormed into my heart and broke through the wall I had erected.

Our joining should happen as soon as possible. Please call upon me this afternoon. I've made all the arrangements, and afterward, we can tell your parents together. I do not want to wait to say my vows.

I'M YOURS, ALWAYS.

Matthew

She folded the letter and tucked it away. Francesca did not need anyone to stumble upon it accidentally before she'd married Matthew. He was right of course. They should not wait to say their vows. Their child depended upon both of them to do the right thing.

That didn't mean she wasn't sad. Francesca had dreamed of her wedding day and had hoped that when she said her vows they would be filled with love. The love was there, but it was also mixed with sadness and disappointment. She could not look upon her wedding day as one with joy, and it would always be one founded in necessity.

She had an hour to prepare for her wedding. Should she contact Violet or Iris? Shouldn't she have someone she cared about there to act as witness? Resigned she went to her bedchamber and penned a quick note, then went to have the butler deliver it. She couldn't have both Iris and Violet there, and she didn't know if they were available. She asked that one of them attend her and gave them the time and place to meet her there.

Francesca didn't change her gown. She had no special dress for her wedding day and didn't care to change into one of her fancier ball gowns. Besides she would need her maid's help to change, and she didn't want to alert anyone in the household of her plans. She needed the wedding to be finished first. Her parents wouldn't want her to marry without love even though she carried Matthew's child. They would want to

her to consider her own happiness, but Francesca couldn't be that selfish.

She took a deep breath and then slipped out of the house. As much as she might like to stall the inevitable, she couldn't. Francesca would arrive earlier than Matthew expected her, but she couldn't wait any longer. Perhaps the wedding could begin early, with or without one of her friends there. She just wanted it to be over with.

The walk to Matthew's townhouse didn't take too long. It was quicker than the first time because she didn't have to stick to the shadows. She strolled up to his door in broad daylight and rapped the knocker against the door as if she belonged there. Soon she would as it would be her house too.

This time Matthew didn't open the door. An elderly man with snow white hair and soft blue eyes stood on the other side. He was probably Matthew's butler. "Yes?" he lifted a brow.

"I am Lady Francesca Kendall. The duke is expecting me." She hoped that Matthew had the foresight to enlighten his servants of her arrival.

"Ah, yes," he said and smiled. "Please follow me."

She entered the townhouse for the last time as an unmarried woman. When she left again, she would be Matthew's wife, and she would have to inform her parent's she married without informing them of her intentions. She hoped they would understand.

The butler led her to the same sitting room she'd informed Matthew of his impending fatherhood. It was different this time. It had been filled with the same wisteria and violets her bouquet had been created with. Matthew was on the far side of

the room speaking with a vicar. This was real. It was happening, and suddenly the room started to spin. She was going to faint and there was nothing to stop her, and no one to catch her fall. Somehow that seemed apt...



MATTHEW GLANCED OVER TO THE ENTRANCE OF THE SITTING room as the butler led Cesca inside. He tried to meet her gaze, but she wouldn't look at him. She kept staring at the flowers, and then she swayed. He rushed over to her side and barely caught her before she hit the floor.

She moaned and curled against him. "Cesca, love," he said in a soothing tone. "Open your eyes for me."

Her eyelids fluttered open, but she still seemed a little dazed. "Where am I?"

He tilted his lips into a smile. "In my arms where you belong." Matthew brushed a stray lock of her strawberry blonde hair to the side. "Do you think you can stand without swooning at the sight of me again?"

She glowered. "I did *not* fall at your feet."

"In a sense you did," he said in an affable tone. "If you wanted my arms around you all you had to do was ask. I promise I'll happily comply with such a request."

Cesca shoved at him. "Let me up you oaf."

Matthew chuckled lightly. She was all right if she was ordering him around and calling him names. "Gladly," he said. Matthew set her down on the floor gently. "It is our wedding day after all. We have yet to say our vows and I wouldn't want

to skip that important part.” He stood and then held his hand out to her. “I do intend to make you my duchess today. Shall we?”

She placed her hand in his and allowed him to help her to her feet. Once she was standing, she met his gaze. “I do not wish to skip that part either. It is important to me as well, though I suspect we have different reasons for wanting this wedding to happen.”

“I must disagree,” he said thoughtfully. “I believe we share the same reasons, but that can wait. The wedding will take place first, then we will discuss the rest later at our leisure.”

“Perhaps,” she agreed. “But I find I don’t much care what your reasons are as long as we’re married. The rest is only details and probably not as important as you might believe.”

He didn’t wish to argue with her about any of it. Matthew wanted the wedding to happen, and if she was in agreement on that much, he wouldn’t push her on the rest. At least not yet... After she was officially his wife, he would have plenty of time to explore everything with her. “Then I suppose we should get that tedious part over with. I’m certain saying the vows will not be as painful as you believe. I promise you being my wife will not be a chore you must endure. It’ll be quite pleasant.”

Cesca rolled her eyes. “I do not need anything of the sort from you.”

He winked. “But I do need that from you.” Matthew had been dreaming about her, and having her underneath him, ever since the first time they’d been together. He would not abstain from bedding her once she was his wife. It was his right to take her over, and over again, and damn it, he needed her. She was the only woman who haunted him. Edith had never made him feel this much, and he now knew he had never loved her.

Cesca thought...she owned him.

“Lady Violet Keene, and the Marquess of Merrifield,” the butler announced.

They both entered the room after the butler announced them and they were practically snarling at each other. There was something there between them, but Matthew didn't care to find out. At least not now before his wedding... “Merrifield?” He lifted a brow. “Why are you here?” He never had asked his friend to act as a witness to his wedding. A mistake that can be rectified now.

“I didn't realize I was unwelcome,” Merrifield drawled. “The more important question is why is she here.” He gestured toward Lady Violet. “And her,” he nodded at Cesca. “What exactly am I interrupting?”

“My wedding,” Matthew replied casually, and Merrifield flinched a little at his announcement. He'd explain it to him later. “Since you're here you can stand as a witness.” He turned toward Cesca. “I assume you invited your friend?”

“I did,” she confirmed, then turned to Lady Violet. “I'm glad you could come.”

“It wasn't easy,” she said, then frowned. “Iris and I had to draw straws to see who would come. I won.”

“I'll make it up to her later,” Cesca said in a soft tone. Then she turned to Matthew. “We should start.”

He nodded. “The vicar is waiting.”

Matthew led her over to the vicar. Merrifield and Lady Violet followed behind them. The vicar began the ceremony. They each promised to love, honor, and cherish each other all of their days. The wedding went by in a blur and he said his vows without thinking about them. They were a means to an

end, and when it was over, he could have Cesca all to himself. He needed to kiss her something fierce.

“I now pronounce you man and wife,” the vicar said. “What God has joined together may no man put asunder.” The vicar smiled. “You may kiss your bride.

Matthew almost didn't wait for permission. He'd been tempted to kiss her before the vicar finished speaking. He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. She gasped and he slid his tongue inside her mouth. This would be no chaste kiss. He wanted to set the parameters of their relationship from the start. They would have a real marriage, and later that night, their vows would be consummated.

He pulled her closer and deepened the kiss. She moaned and kissed him back with equal fervor. This was how it had been between them from the first touch. A fire blazed between them that was undeniable, and constant.

Someone somewhere cleared their throat. Matthew blinked through the haze of passion and managed to pull back. He met the vicar's gaze, and the man winked at him. “It's good to bring two people so much in love together. Since my part is done, I bid you both a good day.” With those words the man left them alone. Well, almost alone. Merrifield and Lady Violet were still there, but they could easily be dispensed with. The hell with waiting until later, Matthew wanted to make love to his wife now.

Eight



It was done. Francesca had said her vows and now she was Matthew's wife. Her baby would never know the stigma of being a bastard. There might be talk, but it wouldn't matter. When her child was born it would be within the bonds of matrimony and the date it had been conceived wouldn't matter. Let the whole world talk. She didn't give a damn.

If only she could forget that kiss at the end of the ceremony. Matthew did have a way of making her desire him, and he had not failed there either. The first touch of his lips against hers had sent spikes of desire throughout her. She should have stopped the kiss before the vicar had, but she'd been consumed by him. Matthew was her greatest weakness, and she feared he always would be.

She turned to her friend, Violet, and said, "Thank you so much for being here. It wouldn't have been the same without at least one of my friends to witness the ceremony...what little of it there was to see anyway."

Violet frowned. "I think he loves you."

Francesca shook her head. "I don't believe Matthew knows what love is." She sighed. "I have no doubt he feels desire. That he does understand and uses it like a weapon. He's quite

good at it.” She placed her hand on her belly. “I know that all too well.”

“But you do love him, don’t you?” Violet asked in a soft tone. “The way you look at him...”

There was no denying the truth. “Most of the time he makes it quite easy to love him. He can be sweet and attentive.” Except for the times he was a complete arse and said all the wrong things. “But it’s not enough.” It would never be enough... “I’ll try to be happy and content with what he can give me. My child has the protection of his name now and that is the only reason I married him.”

“I’m sorry,” Violet said. Her tone was full of pity and Francesca hated that. She pulled her into her arms and hugged her tight. “Do you want me to go with you to speak to your parents?”

She shook her head and pulled away from Violet. “No, I need to do this myself. I’m going to go now. Would you walk with me?”

“Yes,” she said immediately. “Of course, I will, but don’t you want to wait for your husband?”

“He’s busy with his friend.” She lifted a brow. “About that...” Francesca glanced over at Matthew and Merrifield. “What is happening with you and the marquess?”

“Absolutely nothing,” she said. “I thought he was intriguing but now I know the truth. He’s an outright boor.”

Francesca held back a laugh. She had a feeling there was more than Violet was saying, but it could wait. Violet might say she was no longer interested in the Marquess of Merrifield; however, her constant glances in his direction told another story. Francesca had to get her own life in order before

she could become embroiled in her friend's dilemma. When the time came, she would help Violet though. Something told her she would need it. The marquess was part of the scandalous gentleman. Nothing involving them would be easy or simple. "All right," Francesca began. "Keep your secrets. I'm here when you need someone to listen. Now let's slip out while the men are preoccupied." She really didn't want Matthew with her when she faced her parents.

They slipped out and started to walk toward the Weston townhouse. In a couple of days, they were to relocate to Blackthorn house now that her ball was over with. When they reached Violet's home they stopped. "Go on inside. Iris will be waiting for you. I'll pay a call later in the week."

"You'll be over for our weekly tea, right?" Violet asked.

"I wouldn't miss it for anything." She hugged her friend. "Now go before I start to cry. I don't know why I'm an emotional mess."

"You're entitled." Violet stepped back. "It's your wedding day. You only get married once." She smiled. "I do hope you're happy."

"I am." She was in an odd sort of way. All anxiety she had been carrying around with her had dissipated when she said her vows. "Besides I'll have someone else to love soon." The baby growing inside of her would be enough. Francesca would do her best to make it so.

"That's true enough," Violet agreed. "Good luck." With that last bit of encouragement her friend left her alone and went inside.

Francesca finished the trek to her grandfather's townhouse and went inside. No one had noticed she'd left, or at least it

seemed that way. She went to the back of the house and into the library where her father had been working until they moved to Blackthorn. He sat at a table looking over ledgers, and her mother was at his side. That wasn't unusual, but something seemed off. "Hello," she said.

They both glanced up when she spoke. Her mother smiled. "There you are. Bess didn't know where you went off to."

"You were looking for me?" Francesca didn't know if that was a good or bad thing.

"Yes," her mother said. "I saw the lovely flowers. Who is your suitor?"

Francesca swallowed hard. This was the part she hadn't been looking forward to. How did she tell them she'd married and didn't bother to tell them anything about her situation? They would still love her. She had never doubted that. She just hated disappointing them.

When she didn't answer right away her mother frowned. "Is it someone you do not favor?"

"It's not that..." It hurt so much. She hated that she worried her mother even for a brief moment. "I...it's just that..." Francesca nibbled on her bottom lip.

Her father stood and walked over to her. "Whatever it is you can tell us. We love you."

That made it even worse. The tears she'd been fighting started to spill and she sobbed so hard her chest hurt. Her father pulled her into his arms and held her tight. "Baby, tell me what's wrong." There was an edge to his voice that Francesca didn't like. "If someone hurt you..."

She pulled back and shook her head. Francesca didn't want him to defend her honor. That was completely unnecessary.

“No,” she said through the sobs. “I don’t need you to rush in and save me. I’m capable of doing that for myself.”

“Then tell me what is going on,” her father insisted.

Her mother came over then. The color had drained from her face. “My dreams...”

Francesca had forgotten about those. Her mother had been worried about her and had known in some fashion that something was wrong with her. “I’m sorry,” she said, and hiccupped. Francesca did her best to rein in her tears. “I never wanted to disappoint you.”

“You never could,” her father said and cupped her face. “You’re our daughter. Tell us what happened.”

She drew in a deep breath. “I married the Duke of Lindsey this afternoon.” Her mother’s mouth dropped open.

“The hell you did,” her father said. “That can and will be undone.”

“You can’t,” she told him. She shook her head emphatically. “I have to stay married to him.”

“Fran...” Her mother sounded so hurt...

“Why the hell would you marry him without speaking to us?” her father demanded.

“Because she’s carrying my child.” Matthew stood at the entrance to the library. He looked angry. Francesca frowned and considered perhaps she should have waited for him. “And no one is setting aside our marriage. She’s my wife, and she’s not leaving me.”



IT HAD TAKEN HIM LONGER TO GET RID OF MERRIFIELD THAN he thought it would. When he finally convinced the marquess to leave he realized Cesca had slipped out while he was distracted. Once he realized she was gone he knew where to find her. There was only one place she'd run off to. She should have waited for him. He'd been so angry he had wanted to hit something and found himself wishing Merrifield hadn't already left. He blamed his friend for distracting him.

Now he was in the library of Francesca's grandfather's house facing her parents, and he'd overheard them saying they would have their marriage set aside. There was no way he was going to allow that to happen. Matthew didn't work so hard to convince her to marry him only to lose her now. She was his wife, and that was his child she carried.

Her mother turned toward her. "You're having a baby?"

Cesca face blanched. "I was going to tell you..." She nibbled on her bottom lip. "I just hadn't gotten to that part yet." She glanced at Matthew. "You didn't need to come over."

"The hell I didn't. You should have waited for me." His tone was hard and unrelenting. "You don't need to face anything alone ever again."

"While I find it a little endearing," Cesca's mother began. "You do not need to protect her from us. We would never hurt her."

He tilted his head to the side. "I did not think you would, but it is clear she is upset with something. She's been crying."

He wanted to take away all her pain. “What did you say to her?”

“Nothing,” the Marquess of Blackthorn said. “She started crying before she told us anything. I have to wonder if it is *us*, she’s upset with, or is it perhaps *you*?” He glared at Matthew. “What did you do to my daughter?”

Francesca stepped in front of her father. “Daddy, I don’t need your protection. Matthew didn’t do anything I didn’t want him to.”

He wasn’t certain he liked the idea of Cesca defending him. She was wrong though. He had taken advantage of her. She’d been innocent and he’d still used her as if she were a whore. He would like to claim he couldn’t help himself, and in some ways that was true, but not the whole truth. He could have stopped. Matthew hadn’t wanted to. When he first tasted her, kissed her, touched her...he’d become lost to her. When he’d taken her innocence, he should have offered for her then. It was his own self-loathing that had stopped him from doing so. He believed she deserved better than him. It was why she haunted him from that night on. “Love, it isn’t that simple.” He blew out a breath. “Your father has every right to be mad at me. I took advantage of you, and while I don’t regret making you mine it doesn’t change the facts. I saw you, I wanted you, and I had you. I should have waited.”

“Yes,” the marquess agreed. “You should have, and if you hadn’t already married Francesca, I’d have made you, then I probably would have killed you. Since you did the right thing without being forced into it, I’ll let you live.” His lips tilted upward into a menacing smile. “For now.” He held his gaze as he said, “You hurt her, and I’ll revisit the idea of killing you.”

“I’d expect nothing less.” Matthew believed he would gladly end his life if he harmed Cesca. “I have no intention of doing so.” He looked at the marquess and held his gaze. “I love her.” He hadn’t realized that he did until that moment. Matthew had known he wanted her, and even needed her, but hadn’t realized the depth of his feelings. He turned to Cesca. “I love you. I realize you might not believe that, but I do, and I hope one day you’ll love me again.”

A tear slipped from the corner of her eye. “You’re a bloody fool.” She wiped the tear from her cheek. “I never stopped loving you.”

She crossed over to him and wrapped her arms around him. He held her close as if he might lose her if he let her go. Matthew was lucky to have her in his life. This entire day was full of surprises. “I’m ready to go home if you are.” He wanted to make love to her for the rest of the day. It might be too much to ask, but so far, she hadn’t had any difficulty granting him his greatest desires. He only hoped that she might continue to do so for the rest of their days.

“In a little while.” She stepped back. “I think we should stay and have dinner with my parents. They should be given the opportunity to know you.”

He could have argued that point. They had a lot of time to become acquainted with him. He had married Cesca after all, and in half a year she’d bear his child, their grandchild. They would have plenty of time to discover the finer aspects of each other. Instead, he nodded. “If that is what you wish to do.” He could always love her all night long... He lifted her hand and kissed her palm. “I am yours to command.”

She smiled so brightly it made his heart leap with pleasure. “Is that so?” She lifted a brow. “I’ll have to keep that in mind

for later.” She turned toward her parents. “Is it all right if we both stay. I should have asked first.”

Her mother nodded. “You’re always welcome here.” She turned toward Matthew. “You do seem to love her. I hope in time she’s not disappointed in her choice.” She shook her head. “Sometimes the future is murky, but I believe you two will wade through it with little difficulty.” She turned toward the marquess. “I’m going to inform cook we have an addition to dinner tonight. Please don’t be rude while I am gone.”

“I’m never rude,” he replied, then added. “Without cause.”

The marchioness chuckled as she left the room but didn’t deign to reply. The marquess met Cesca’s gaze. “This is truly what you want? I don’t care if you’re carrying his child. If you want out of the marriage, we can make it go away.”

Matthew started to step forward but Cesca placed her hand on his chest. “It is what I want daddy, don’t make it difficult.” She smiled softly. “I do love him.”

“Then I’ll let you keep him.” He smiled. “Come give me a hug. It’s the least you owe me after denying me the right to give you away at your wedding.”

Cesca crossed over to him and hugged her father. “I love you, daddy.”

Matthew was choked up. They had a good relationship. It was nothing like the one he had with his own parents. He envied it a little bit, but he mostly felt glad she had them. It meant their own children would have wonderful grandparents through her. They certainly wouldn’t benefit from any warmth where his mother was concerned. Though the dowager duchess would be grateful to hear he’d finally married and began siring an heir.

It was perhaps wrong of him, but he hoped their first child was a girl. He smiled at the thought. Yes, a girl would be perfect.

“Are you happy?” Cesca asked.

“Yes,” he told her. “I am fortunate to have your love. Nothing could possibly make me happier than that.” He pressed his lips to hers. “And soon we’ll have a child to share that love with.” Matthew pressed his hand to her belly. “I don’t deserve you, but I’ll be damned if I’ll let you go. You’re stuck with me.”

She laughed. “You might come to regret that one day.”

“Never,” he promised. He didn’t know what love was until her. “Never,” he repeated, then kissed her again. Loving her forever was a privilege, and he’d do his best to live up to that.

Nine



One month later...

Francesca stared out the window of the townhouse she now called home. The room she occupied would be the nursery. She had decided to spend some time in the room to help her decide how she would like to renovate it. They had to have it completed before the baby was born. So much had happened in such a short time. It was almost too much for her to wrap her mind around.

Matthew had said all the right things in front of her parents, but still she had doubts. How could she not? He'd treated her terribly and suddenly he declared his love? She wanted to believe him, she did, but she still kept a part of herself back. As if she were afraid if she went all in with him she'd only end up a shell of herself. She wanted to make things work with Matthew. She wanted that more than anything.

If not for herself, then for her unborn child. She was now over four months along, and in five short months she'd have a baby. One that would need both parents to be there for him or her. If she couldn't get past her misgivings what kind of life would that be for her child? What kind of life would that be for either of them? She had to be certain once and for all. The

problem was she had no idea of what it would take for her to believe in him.

“Cesca,” Mathew called out.

She should go find him, and have a discussion. If she didn’t tell him how she was feeling and how her uncertainty plagued her, then how could she expect any changes. She was married and had a baby on the way. If there was ever a time for her to be a mature, grown woman, it was now. “I’m in here,” she hollered.

Mathew strolled into the room with a large box in his hand. “I know you wanted to wait a little bit before we bought anything...” He held the box up. “But I saw this and couldn’t help myself.”

“What is it?” She tilted her head. It was a rather large box and she was surprised that he hadn’t asked a servant to carry it up the stairs. It looked heavy too.

He set the box down. It was more of a crate really. He pried the wooden top off and gestured for her to come over. “Look,” he told her.

Inside the box was a small mahogany wooden horse with a leather saddle on it. The horse’s legs were settled on curved wooden pieces similar to what might be on a sled. “A rocking horse?” The baby wouldn’t be able to use it for some time. Why had he rushed to purchase it?

“When the babe is old enough it can sit on it and rock like it’s riding a horse. Isn’t it great?” There was such an expression of happiness on his face... It was breathtaking. Such a simple thing gave him joy. “I know this probably doesn’t seem like much to you,” he began. “But I didn’t have

anything like this as a boy. I want my child to know how much we want him or her. I need to be a good father.”

Her heart ached. How could she doubt him when he did wonderful things like this? He continued to surprise her all the time. “It’s wonderful,” she told him. “I don’t doubt you will be the best father you can be.”

“You don’t?” He blew out a breath. “At least one of us has faith in me.”

“You should be kinder to yourself. The baby isn’t here yet and you already think you might not be what he or she needs. There will plenty of things for us to worry about as our child grows. Your ability to be a father isn’t something we need to concern ourselves with.”

“I don’t think it is that easy,” he told her. “But I’ll try to relax.” He shook his head and closed his eyes, then took several deep breaths. He visibly calmed, but that didn’t mean some of that anxiety wasn’t still inside of him.

“That’s all you can do,” she told him. Francesca did love him even when he had been a fool. She looked around the room. “Perhaps that can be our theme.”

“What?” he said in a confused tone. “My lack of faith in myself?”

She laughed. “No silly,” she told him and then pointed at the horse. “That can be. We can have the furniture made with horses in mind. Have them engraved in the woodwork. Maybe have a mural of horses painted on one of the walls.”

“I like that,” he said. “I am certain that whatever you decide will be perfect though. I cannot wait to see it when it is finished.” His hair was a little ruffled and he had a dreamy

expression on his face. He looked like a man in love with his wife and content with his lot in life.

She went over to him and wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned against him. He hugged her and kissed the top of her head. “I love you,” he said.

It wasn't a shock as much as it had been in the past to hear him say the words. She was growing more and more accustomed to hearing them from him. Maybe she didn't have to tell him about her doubts. They might be already starting to dissipate. Over time she would grow to trust him more. This was all new and uncertainty should be expected. Shouldn't it?

“I love you too,” she told him. She lifted her head and he leaned down to press his lips to hers. It was a soft kiss that spoke of their feelings for each other. Francesca decided her reservations could wait for another day. For now she intended to enjoy being with Matthew.



MATHEW SAT AT HIS DESK IN HIS STUDY GOING OVER HIS accounts. He had even more of a reason to ensure his estates remained solvent. Now that he had a family to consider he was being extra careful. Nothing meant more to him than Francesca and their unborn child. The past several months had seemed as if they'd taken forever. He made sure to tell her how much she meant to him every single day, and any day their family would include a new addition. He couldn't wait for their baby to be born.

He wasn't a fool. Matthew knew she still had doubts. The only thing he knew to do was tell her and show her when he

could how much he adored her. Beyond that he had no clue what to do. How could he make her realize he would always love her? He wasn't sure she'd fully accept he loved her, and that wasn't a good sign for their marriage. It was his fault of course. He'd been a right arse from the start. Even the way he'd seduced her and abandoned her hadn't set a good precedent. He didn't blame her for her misgivings. Honestly, he'd have been surprised if she didn't have any at all.

He sighed and rubbed his hands over his face. What the hell should he do. They had been married for five months now. She was due to have their babe in less than a month.

"You look horrible," a man said from the doorway to his study. "Does marriage not agree with you?"

"Hampstead," Goodland greeted his oldest friend. "Why are you here?"

"Can a man not visit one of his closest friends without having a reason?" He lifted a brow. "You wound me." The Earl of Hampstead placed his hand over his chest. "How are you really?"

"I'm all right." He pasted a smile on his face. "I'm worried about Francesca. The babe is due soon and she's grown more and more miserable as each day passes."

"I've heard this stage isn't pleasant for women," Hampstead said. "They're ready to be done with pregnancy." The earl grinned. "I've also heard that they don't want their husbands to touch them ever again too."

It had been weeks since he made love to his wife. He'd feared hurting her or the babe. "I'm sure you're exaggerating." He'd do whatever Francesca wanted. He loved her enough to leave her be if that was what she desired.

“I suppose you’ll discover the truth soon enough.” Hampstead went over to the decanter of brandy and poured two fingers into a glass. He held up the decanter. “Do you want some?”

Matthew shook his head. “Not right now.”

“Matthew...” He glanced up and met Francesca’s gaze. “The babe...it’s coming early.” She panted as she held her hand to her side. Francesca moaned and held on to the door frame. “We need the doctor.”

He turned to Hampstead. Matthew didn’t think twice. He set his glass down and met his gaze. “I’ll go for him.”

Matthew picked Francesca up and carried her out of the room. He didn’t stop to see if Hampstead left for the doctor. His concern was for his wife. When they reached her bedchamber, he settled her on the bed. “What can I do for you?”

“Help me take off this dress.” Her breathing was harsh and labored.

Matthew nodded. “Lean forward against me and I’ll undo the buttons.” She did as he instructed, and with nimble fingers he unfastened them and pulled the bodice loose. Francesca had stopped wearing a corset when it had become too uncomfortable. He had been glad when she had.

He removed her dress, shoes, and stockings. When he was done all that remained was her chemise. “There,” he said. “Are you more comfortable?”

“As comfortable as I can be considering,” she told him. Her contractions were coming closer and closer together.

“Let’s get you settled in bed,” he told her. Matthew removed the quilt and pushed it to the foot of the bed. He

settled a sheet over her and then brushed his knuckle over her cheek. “I love you,” he told her. “I’m here for you. Just tell me what you want and I’ll see that you have it.”

Francesca’s breathing had grown heavier and it terrified him. He’d never been present when a babe was born. Was this normal? God, he hoped so. He couldn’t lose her.

“Don’t leave me,” she said between breaths.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he promised. “I’ll never leave you. I need you too much.” He kissed her quickly. “You’re going to have to get used to having me around. I don’t walk away from those I love.”

She smiled but he could tell she was still in pain. The hurt was there in her features as she strained against it. “I’m sorry that I’ve doubted you.”

“Shh,” he said. “We don’t need to talk about that. It doesn’t matter.”

“It does,” she insisted, then moaned as a new wave of contractions attacked her. When they dissipated she met his gaze. “You made mistakes,” she began. “But you owned up to them, and since then, you’ve been a wonderful husband. I...” She leaned against the headboard and screamed as pain hit her. Francesca took several deep fortifying breaths. “I won’t doubt you again. I...trust...you.”

Matthew stared at the bedroom door. Where the hell was the doctor? What would happen if the babe wanted to come and the doctor hadn’t yet arrived. He knew nothing about helping a woman deliver a babe into the world.

“I hear we have a new member of the family coming today,” a man said from the doorway.

Matthew breathed a sigh of relief. It was about damn time. He didn't bother responding to the doctor. The man came in and went to work checking over Francesca. "And the little one is ready to come now. It looks as if I arrived in time."

Matthew glared at him. If he didn't need the man he'd hit him. He had such a callous attitude. "It's good you're here then," he said through gritted teeth.

"If you would like you can leave the room. I'll take care of them," the doctor said.

Matthew shook his head. "I'm staying."

"As you wish," the doctor said.

It wasn't long after that a babe's screams filled the room. Francesca was tired, but she was beautiful. She'd always be that way to him. "I love you," he told her. He would never tire of telling her that.

"I love you," she said. "Our baby..."

"Is perfect," he told her. "Like her mother..." He kissed her cheek. "Rest sweetheart. You've earned it."

Matthew stood and joined the doctor as he checked over the baby. For the first time in his life...he was content. He couldn't imagine ever being happier than this moment. The baby and Francesca gave him purpose. As long as he lived, he'd ensure they were always loved and protected.

Epilogue



It was a warm day. Summer had not yet let go so autumn could take control of the weather. Francesca had been miserable for the entire summer in the later stages of her pregnancy, and she thought she might expire from the heat. Matthew had been wonderful throughout her misery. He'd done whatever he could to help her find some comfort. They had opted to stay in London instead of retiring to his country estate and they were grateful when the baby was born a few weeks early.

That had not made his mother happy though...

The dowager duchess had hoped to be there for the birth of her first grandchild. Of course, she hoped it would be a boy. Francesca only wished for a healthy child, boy or girl. Matthew would need an heir, but they could have more children if the first was born female, and she'd told the dowager duchess that through correspondence.

"Have you written your mother yet?" Francesca asked Matthew. "She should hear it from you about the birth of her grandchild."

"I decided it would be better for her to hear it through the Times." Matthew grinned, and it had an evilness to it. "I made sure to have the announcement sent directly to her."

“You didn’t,” Francesca frowned. “That’s just...wrong.”

“She’s going to have a fit and you know it,” he said. “This way it is more fun.” His grin widened. “We might even hear the screams all the way from Lindsey Castle.”

Matthew held the baby against his chest and rocked back and forth. The baby was almost a month old now, and they had barely slept since she’d given birth. Their little darling had a set of lungs and was not afraid to use them.

“You are rotten,” she told him. “I don’t understand why she was so insistent on a boy.” Francesca frowned. “She’s acting as if this will be our only child.”

“In my mother’s world it would be.” Matthew frowned. “She was grateful I was a boy and then refused to join my father in his bed again. It didn’t matter that a spare might be needed. She hated carrying me and refused to do it again when it wasn’t necessary.” He sighed and rocked the baby again. “My parents didn’t have a happy marriage.”

“Well, isn’t it lucky that we are not them.” She met his gaze and smiled. “We can start working on adding to our family once I’m fully healed.” She winked. “The doctor said it might be another couple of weeks. I tried to lessen that, but he said if I wanted to enjoy making love to my husband I needed to wait.”

“I agree with the doctor,” he told her. “I want you in my bed again too, but I won’t hurt you.” The baby whimpered. “What is it sweetheart. Tell daddy and I’ll give you whatever you want.”

Francesca rolled her eyes. “Do not start making promises like that now. We’ll have a spoiled child on our hands, and then you’ll have misery of your own making.”

“It will be worth it.” He grinned. “I will not be the type of parent that has nothing to do with his children. I’d like a relationship much like the one you have with your parents.”

Francesca smiled. Her parents had come to adore Matthew. They forgave him for stealing her away, and not asking permission to marry her. They were ecstatic to be new grandparents. Matthew was taking to fatherhood quite well too, and he often spoke to her father about what he should or shouldn’t do. He really wanted to do everything right, and it warmed her heart how much he tried. If she didn’t love him before, she would have fallen for him after witnessing him with their baby.

She shook her head. “You are already a great father.” She sighed. “However, you’re a rotten son. We should visit your mother and let her meet her grandchild. Especially, after the way you are informing her. What exactly did you put in that announcement?”

He walked over to a nearby table and grabbed the Times, then flipped it to the front page. There was a large announcement there.

The Duke and Duchess of Lindsey wish to announce the birth of their first child. They welcome a daughter; Lady Robin August Finley Grant was born the last week of August. She is also the first grandchild of the Marquess and Marchioness of Blackthorn, and the second great grandchild, of the Duke and Duchess of Weston. Lady Robin is loved by her entire family, and they all welcome her with joy. She is a blessing they will cherish always...

Francesca snorted. “You failed to mention she’s the first grandchild of your mother.”

“I didn’t see the point,” he said dryly. “My mother wanted a grandson.” He smiled down at his daughter. “I personally hoped for a girl. She’s too precious for words. Aren’t you sweetheart.” He cooed at Robin and she blew bubbles at him as if she understood.

Francesca sighed. “Why don’t you give her to the nurse. It’s past time for her nap.”

“Why are you spoiling my fun?” He lifted a brow. “I’m having an important conversation with our daughter.”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s too bad. I did hope you would take a nap with me.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “We might not be able to make love, but I do believe there are other things we can do to pass the time.” Francesca sashayed to the doorway. “But if you’d rather spend the afternoon with Robin I understand.”

Heat filled his gaze and his mouth tilted upward into a sensual smile. “I won’t be long,” he promised, and carried their daughter to the nursery.

She laughed as she raced up the stairs, anticipation racing through her. Their relationship hadn’t been conventional, but she didn’t regret one moment of it. Sometimes easy wasn’t always best. They appreciated each other, and their love grew stronger every day. He was her everything, and now they had Robin to make their lives more complete. The announcement had been correct. They truly were blessed, and Francesca would always be grateful for loving her wicked rogue.

*Excerpt: The Rake Who Loves
me*



SCANDALOUS GENTLEMEN BOOK TWO

Prologue



Spring 1866

Love did not always equal a happy ending...

Lady Violet Keene wanted to believe it did, but she was no fool. The ton did not allow love to bloom. Society had expectations, and love, unfortunately, would never be a part of them. For her, the daughter of an earl, that meant she would have to find a husband. One with a prestigious title and high annual income preferably, but as long as she married, that didn't really matter. The marriage part did.

Today her closest friend, Lady Francesca Kendall, was marrying the Duke of Lindsey. She couldn't be certain if they would have a successful marriage. In the eyes of the ton, Francesca had achieved something many ladies dreamed about. She had made a fabulous match marrying a duke. There would be several disappointed mothers once the news of the wedding spread through the gossip mill. Francesca would have been happier if her wedding hadn't been a necessity. Her friend was in a delicate condition that hastened the need for marriage.

Violet hoped she never made a similar mistake.

A marriage of convenience was not for her. If she had to marry, she wanted something much more substantial than this

cold union between the Duke of Lindsey and her friend. Though something told her it wasn't cold at all, but a simmering fire ready to burst. The duke's eyes were heated as he stared at his bride. Perhaps there was some hope for them. They might come to love each other.

Violet glanced at the other person in the room. The Marquess of Merrifield didn't smile. He stared at the duke and Francesca with cold fury. She didn't understand why he seemed so angry, but she wanted to slap him. He wasn't the one being forced to marry. The least he could do was try to support his friend.

She sighed.

The marquess was Violet's weakness. She found him unbearably attractive. Whenever he was nearby, her gaze wandered in his direction before she realized she was staring. His hair was as dark as the night sky and his eyes were a light blue so fair they were almost icy. When his gaze met hers, a chill spread through her. Only he could look at her and make her both heated and frozen at the same time. God help her, she wanted him, but she could never allow herself to give in to that temptation.

The ceremony, what little it had entailed, ended.

Francesca turned to Violet and said, "Thank you so much for being here. It wouldn't have been the same without at least one of my friends to witness the ceremony...what little of it there was to see, anyway."

Violet frowned. "I think he loves you." She wanted to believe that so much, for Francesca's sake.

Francesca shook her head. "I don't believe Matthew knows what love is." She sighed. "I have no doubt he feels desire.

That he understands and uses it like a weapon. He's quite good at it." She placed her hand on her belly. "I know that all too well."

"But you do love him, don't you?" Violet asked in a soft tone. "The way you look at him..."

She glanced at her husband. "Most of the time he makes it quite easy to love him. He can be sweet and attentive." There was a wistfulness in her voice as she spoke. "But it's not enough." Her friend craved love from her husband. Violet's heart hurt for her. "I'll try to be happy and content with what he can give me. My child has the protection of his name now and that is the only reason I married him."

"I'm sorry," Violet said. She wished she could make the duke see how much Francesca loved him and that she needed so much more from him. She pulled her into her arms and hugged her tight. "Do you want me to go with you to speak to your parents?"

She shook her head and pulled away from Violet. "No, I need to do this myself. I'm going to go now. Would you walk with me?"

"Yes," she said immediately. "Of course, I will, but don't you want to wait for your husband?"

"He's busy with his friend." She lifted a brow. "About that..." Francesca glanced over at the duke and marquess. "What is happening with you and the marquess?"

"Absolutely nothing," she said. There would never be anything between them. "I thought he was intriguing, but now I know the truth. He's an outright bore."

They slipped out and started to walk toward Violet's home. When they reached Dresden Manor, they stopped. "Go on

inside. Iris will be waiting for you. I'll pay a call later in the week."

"You'll be over for our weekly tea, right?" Violet asked.

"I wouldn't miss it for anything." She hugged her friend. "Now go before I start to cry. I don't know why I'm an emotional mess."

"You're entitled." Violet stepped back. "It's your wedding day. You only get married once." She smiled. "I do hope you're happy."

"I am." Her smile wavered a little bit, but she seemed resigned. Violet fought tears. This was all so unfair, and she couldn't help hating the duke a little for hurting her friend. Besides, I'll have someone else to love soon." She placed her hand on her stomach and almost looked serene. Violet hoped that loving that baby would heal some of the hurt.

"That's true enough," Violet agreed. "Good luck." With that last bit of encouragement, violet left her alone and went inside.

She had been intrigued by the Marquess of Merrifield, but after speaking with him several times now, and witnessing Francesca's pain, Violet decided to have nothing to do with him. He was rotten. Much like all of the Scandalous Gentleman. Two had gotten married now, and three remained bachelors. What were the chances they would all fall in love? Violet would hazard a guess of zero. So far only one seemed to truly love his wife—the Earl of Winchester had married Francesca's cousin Adeline. He had been the first of the scandalous gentlemen to fall. The Duke of Lindsey had married, but as to love, that one might never happen.

The remaining three: The Marquess of Merrifield, Earl of Hampstead, and Viscount of Goodland—they would probably ensure they didn't fall into any traps. That was only one reason for her to steer clear of the marquess. The biggest was she didn't want to live her entire life void of love, and he seemed incapable of giving his heart to anyone.

One



December 1866

Violet stared out the window of the sitting room. Snow floated from the sky in tiny white ice crystals that were gorgeous, even if they were often a nuisance. Winter was far from her favorite season, but she supposed the snow was preferable to rain. At least she could count on the fluffy white flakes from not completely soaking her to the skin. Still...she much preferred the spring and summer months. Snow accumulation didn't allow for easy travel, and she hated being cooped up inside.

“Why are you so melancholy?” Iris asked.

She turned to face her sister and frowned. Iris was her twin sister, but they were not identical. The only thing they shared alike was the same shade of golden blonde hair. Iris had green eyes, and Violet's were a light blue. Today her sister wore a sunny yellow day dress that matched her equally cheerful mood. Violet found it distasteful. Not because her sister didn't look beautiful or that Iris's demeanor was as chipper as a sunny summer day. No, she couldn't blame her sister for her mood. Violet woke up with a sour disposition and nothing seemed to soothe her inner growly beast. She didn't wish to explain herself to Iris, though. It would be long and drawn out,

and Violet was already in a surly mood. “Do you ever wish for something so far out of your grasp that it makes you feel as everything in life is impossible?”

Iris sighed. “Of course I do.” She stood and walked over to Violet and placed a hand on her arm. “I’m certain we both wish for the same thing too.”

Violet doubted that very much. Maybe at one time they may have, but Violet had different aspirations than she had even a few months prior. “What makes you so certain?”

“Because I know you.” Iris tilted her head to the side and then blew out a breath. “You’ve lost hope, but you shouldn’t.”

Violet shook her head. “I have not lost hope.” She hadn’t. Because she never had any to begin with. She couldn’t lose something that she never dared to hold inside her heart. “I’ve decided that I’d much rather live my life with no expectations.” Then she’d no longer be disappointed with what she did have. “But today it is difficult to enjoy my blessings.” She turned away from her sister and glanced outside. “Especially on such a dreary day.” Though she couldn’t blame the weather for her mood. Though it provided a convenient excuse...

“You are right,” Iris agreed. “On enjoying our life no matter what, and that this weather is dismal.” She glanced outside. “Perhaps if the snow lets up, we can go for a walk. We can visit Francesca.”

“That’s unlikely and you know it.” The weather would not cooperate, no matter how much either of them willed it to. Besides, we are to visit Francesca tomorrow for tea. There’s no need to go over today.” Their friend was happily married with a daughter. In some ways, Violet was envious of that, but she didn’t want to be a duchess. She wasn’t even certain she

wanted to be a wife or mother. Something was missing from her life, though, but she couldn't pinpoint exactly what.

"I wish I didn't agree with you." Iris's cheerful demeanor was slipping. "I had hoped wearing something bright today would help me feel better, and for a while it did, but now..." She nibbled on her bottom lip. "I'm as melancholy as you are."

"Oh, dear..." She met her sister's gaze. "You've caught my doldrums. I'm terribly sorry." She hadn't wanted to inflict her mood on Iris.

"It's not your fault." She moved away from Violet and plopped very unladylike onto the settee. "I've been thinking about Lord Hampstead."

Violet had to restrain herself from rolling her eyes. "That particular earl is not worth any of your time."

Her sister lifted a brow. "Would you say the same if I told you that about Lord Merrifield?"

"Yes," Violet said without thinking. "He's an arrogant rogue who only thinks about himself." That might not be exactly true. He seemed fond of his friends, and he was mostly polite to everyone else. It was only her he seemed to be rude and temperamental with.

"You say that now," Iris began. "But I have seen how you look at him. If he paid you any sort of attention, you would like it."

She snorted. "Oh, he pays attention to me." Violet paced in front of the window. "He takes the time to tell me everything I'm doing wrong and orders me around as if he has the right to." She clenched her hands into fists. "Sometimes I want

to...” She lifted her hands and squeezed the air. “But that would only cause a scandal and I refuse to give into the urge.”

Iris chuckled. “I suppose that is somewhere to start.”

“Start what?” Violet asked in a startled tone. “You’re not suggesting I actually wrap my hands around his neck and give it a good squeeze.”

“Well, that wouldn’t be a good way to further a courtship along.” She shook her head. “But, sister dear, you have his attention. Use it and steer him in the direction you wish to go.” She frowned. “At least the man you’re in love with is paying some attention to you. “

Violet stared at her sister. “I’m not in love with him.”

“Right,” she said, then waived her hand. “Keep telling yourself that.” She took a deep breath. “We should do something to bring everyone together. Francesca isn’t going to her family’s Christmas this year. She doesn’t want to travel with the baby. I’m sure there will be others in London.”

“What do you propose we do?” Violet was still astonished her sister believed she loved the Marquess of Merrifield. “Have a ball?”

“That’s a fabulous idea.” Iris beamed. “I’ll ask father, and then we can start planning it.” She practically bounced out of the room, leaving Violet alone.

What the blazes had she gotten herself into? She hadn’t been serious about suggesting a ball. Too late now to take it back, though. Violet turned back to the window and her dismal thoughts. Even the idea of dancing wasn’t warming the cold that had settled into her. She feared nothing would...

Zachariah strolled into his club. Once inside, he shook the snowflakes off his coat and handed it to one of the workers. He should have stayed home, but he was feeling restless. With the snow falling down, he couldn't go far. Not that he would, but it still limited his options. "Are the Earl of Hampstead and Viscount Goodland here?" He knew Lindsey or Winchester wouldn't be. They were settled at home with their wives and children.

He shuddered at the thought of that domesticity.

The very idea of tying himself to a woman and siring children made him feel ill. He did not understand how two of his friends could have succumbed to the very idea of marital bliss. It almost seemed like a misnomer—marriage did not equal bliss. At least not in his limited experience. Oh, he had never been married before, but he'd bore the brunt of his parent's deep in his soul. They had hated each other to their very cores, and he never wanted to live like they had. He would not marry anyone for any reason.

"Both Lord Hampstead and Lord Goodland are in a private room. They've been here for some time." The man who held Zachariah's coat told him.

"Wonderful," Zachariah said, then grinned. "Then they plan on being here for a while."

"I would believe so," he answered.

Zachariah nodded and walked away to go in search of his friends. He planned on getting foxed and forgetting about everything for several hours. There was only one room his friends could be in. They preferred the room in the far back of the club so they wouldn't be disturbed. The club owners often held it empty for them because they all frequented the club so often. The five of them, the ton dubbed Scandalous

Gentlemen, had been inseparable. At least until two of them fell in love... Now there were only three left, and Zachariah hoped it stayed that way.

He stopped inside the entrance and leaned against the doorframe. Goodland was lounging on a leather chair with a decanter of scotch in one hand and a snifter in the other. "Do you ever wonder why we bother with pouring it out of the decanter?" Goodland asked. "When we often drink it faster than we can keep it filled."

Hampstead, who was shuffling cards, answered, "Because we're supposed to be civilized."

"But we're often not," Zachariah said. "Civilized that is."

"It's about time you joined us." Goodland sat up and held the decanter to him. "Come here and I'll pour you two fingers." He lifted a brow. "Unless you want to try your hand at drinking straight from the source."

"For that I think we would need the barrel it came from," Hampstead drawled, then snatched the brandy from Goodland. "Sit," he told Zachariah. "We can play a bit of Faro." He gestured toward Goodland. "He's too inebriated for it to be any fun."

"Is that why you took away his brandy?" Zachariah asked.

"No," Hampstead replied. "I wanted some before he drank it all." He poured brandy into two snifters and handed one to Zachariah, then handed the decanter back to Goodland. "I'd never deprive a friend of brandy."

Zachariah chuckled. His mood lifted a little now that he was with his friends, but he still didn't feel quite right. He wasn't certain what would help, but at least he wasn't

completely miserable now. “Are we going to gamble or is this game for fun?”

“Gambling is fun,” Hampstead replied. “It would be boring if we skipped that part.” He dealt the cards, but neither one of them picked them up off the table.

“What are the stakes, then?” Zachariah asked.

“How about whoever wins gets to make the other do something they don’t want to.” There was little either one of them wouldn’t do.

“That sounds like a challenging task either way.” Zachariah grinned.

“I thought it would make things...interesting.” Hampstead lifted his glass and sipped his brandy. “Do you agree?”

“I think we will need an impartial third party.” He glanced at Goodland. “To ensure that whoever loses keeps their word, and that the winner doesn’t take things too far.”

“I’ll be your...whatever you called it,” Goodland replied with a wave of his hand. “You might need to remind me when I am sober.”

“Then we’re all agreed?” Hampstead said.

“Yes, we are,” Zachariah told him, then picked up his cards.

They played for a while. A servant came in and replaced their empty brandy decanter two times, and by the morning, after hours of play, all three of them were quite drunk.

“There,” Hampstead said, as he laid his card on the table. “I win.”

Zachariah cursed under his breath. He had lost. There was no arguing the results. “Yes,” he agreed, then leaned back in his chair. “The question is: what is it you wish me to do?”

Hampstead grinned. “Nothing too tedious.”

That didn’t sound good at all. “Then why do I believe otherwise?” He lifted a brow.

“Because you’re a suspicious person.” Hampstead finished the brandy in his glass.

“I have had plenty of reasons to be.” His parents hadn’t left a good impression on him as a child and it spilled heavily into adulthood. “So, tell me.”

Hampstead sighed. “Fine. I’ve had most of the night to consider what I would ask of you.” He lifted the empty decanter and stared at it, then set it down. “I don’t need anything from you, but you do need to do something for yourself and you never will unless someone makes you.”

Zachariah had a terrible feeling settling inside his gut. He had made an error and he could not back out of it. This was a debt of honor, after all. “What,” he nearly growled the word out.

“I want you to,” he paused. “Not court a woman. That’s asking too much, but... become acquainted with one. Talk to them and learn something personal about them. Their likes, needs, wishes...outside of a bedroom. I don’t mean a courtesan or actress, but a proper lady. One that any of us could be seen with in public.” Merrifield folded his hands together. “And Goodland and I will choose the lady for you.”

Zachariah cursed. “How long do I have to complete this task?”

“By the end of Christmastide,” he answered. “We shall choose the lucky lady for this endeavor sometime later today.” He winked. “We’ll need to rest a bit first, but we wouldn’t want to keep you waiting for long.”

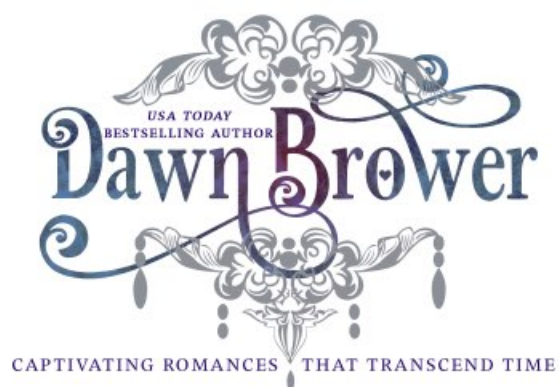
“All right.” He wanted to punch something, but he refrained. Lucky lady indeed... Zachariah didn’t believe this unknown paragon would feel fortunate, but perhaps he was wrong. She might think he intended to court her and if so that would be disastrous. “If you’ll pardon me. I think it is past time I returned home.” Without another word, he stood and turned away from his two friends. The night had been pleasant until his friend stabbed him straight in the heart. This was a betrayal he would not soon forget, and he’d ensure that, in some fashion, Hampstead would pay for making him do this.

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About Dawn Brower

USA TODAY Bestselling author, DAWN BROWER writes both historical and contemporary romance. There are always stories inside her head; she just never thought she could make them come to life. That creativity has finally found an outlet.

Growing up, she was the only girl out of six children. She raised two boys as a single mother; there is never a dull moment in her life. Reading books is her favorite hobby, and she loves all genres.

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A Marriage Most Convenient



ROBYN DEHART

One



London, 1893

It was beginning to bore him.

Stealing, that is. For the past fourteen months, he'd been disguising himself as the infamous Jack of Hearts, to steal from the rich and privileged of London society. At first it had been enthralling, a challenge, and a rather daring one at that. But now he had become a novelty.

If the Jack of Hearts made an appearance at your party, it was considered a smashing success. So here he was—his bag full of useless bobbles, half of them not even authentic stones—crouched in the shadows outside of Maybrook Hall, having completed his most recent caper, but wondering why he continued to even do this.

Sometimes he wondered why he'd begun doing it in the first place. Yes, there had been the dire financial straits of his family and the jewels, and disguising himself as Jack had allowed him to lay claim to the jewels and family heirlooms his mother had lost or given away over the years. At first, he'd relished being a thief, doing things so daring and bold that no one who knew the real him could have imagined him capable. But he

had long ago accomplished the goal he set for himself when he first took up the mantle of Jack.

The jewels his mother had given or gambled away over the years in fits of near-manic generosity had been restored to the family. Personally, he'd made some rather smart investments allowing the family coffers to flourish. He no longer needed to be Jack.

Furthermore, being Jack, tricking all of the ton, was no longer exciting. In fact, it had become quite tedious.

So why was he still doing this? Why did he even still bother dressing up as Jack of Hearts to steal from the rich and the bored?

Jack sighed and turned to leave. There would be no more thieving tonight. He would simply creep out the back garden door outside Maybrook Hall and disappear into the shadows. Perhaps for the last time. However, before he walked more than a few steps, a female voice rang out from the terrace above him.

“Lord Winthrop,” the woman said. “Your attentions are most unexpected.”

Jack stopped and listened intently to the exchange on the balcony above him, though the next exchange of words was too soft for him to hear it clearly. Without even seeing the people, he knew who they were. He'd know her voice anywhere.

The man, obviously, was the Earl of Winthrop, a useless, dandy of a man whose most prominent characteristics were his weak chin and his domineering mother. The woman, whose voice Jack knew all too well, was Charlotte Reed, a close friend of his own sister. Charlotte was known for her beauty,

her charm, and the dozens of hearts she'd both won and then demolished since her come out.

Charlotte Reed was a vain, silly, frivolous creature, and he wasn't the least bit interested in her affairs.

He turned to leave, almost feeling sorry for Winthrop—the poor sap—when he heard her say, this time her voice ringing firmly, “I said, no thank you, Lord Winthrop. I don't take kindly to unwanted attention.”

Jack froze at her words. Unwanted attention?

Damnation.

Jack peered between the bushes to see Frederick Cowell, the Earl of Winthrop grip Charlotte's arm. Pink marred her skin above the man's tight grip. Anger surged through Jack and he fisted his hands. He could tolerate plenty of questionable behaviors—he was, after all, a thief—but mistreating a woman was not one of them.

“Don't be so demure, Charlotte. I was only wanting a kiss.”

The man's words were not even slurred. He couldn't very well blame alcohol for his abhorrent actions.

“I have *not* given you leave to speak to me with such familiarity,” she snapped.

Charlotte may be a renowned flirt and he may be a thief, but he wasn't about to stand by while any woman was manhandled.

Jack stepped forward, primed to make a move, but before he could, Charlotte shoved against Winthrop's chest. Clearly taken off guard, the man stumbled and fell onto his arse.

“I do not desire you to kiss me. Should I change my mind, I shall endeavor to inform you posthaste. Now go back inside before I find your Ma-ma and tell her about your outrageous behavior.”

Winthrop scrambled to his feet and dusted off his backside. “My sincerest apologies, Miss Reed, I was simply so overcome with your beauty, I lost my head. I do hope you’ll consider me if you go riding in the park.” Then the man skulked back into the ballroom, leaving her alone in the darkness.

Jack nearly laughed. It seemed Charlotte Reed could take care of herself. He might be impressed if he had it in him to care about her one way or the other. Jack waited a moment to ensure she remained alone and safe. She was clearly visible where she stood in the light cast from the ballroom windows behind her. He was hidden in the shadows, unseen. This was nothing new. Charlotte never saw him. Had never seen him. Not really.

Swallowing the unexpected rise of annoyance, he turned to leave.

“Who’s out there?” Charlotte called out.

He stilled, turning back to watch her as she stepped from the balcony, her dancing slippers pattering against the hard marble steps. She walked into the gardens below and peered into the darkness. Her gaze was aimed directly at him, but he knew she could not actually see him.

He took a single step back. Years of slipping in and out of shadows, creeping through gardens and over rooftops had taught him how to walk softly. She could not possibly have heard his movement.

And yet, she took another step toward him, her gaze intent on the shadows where he hid. “I know you’re out there, even if I cannot see you.”

Another step back and his back hit the garden wall. If she kept coming, she’d run straight into him.

Unwilling to be caught hiding like a coward, Jack cleared his throat, but made no move to towards her. “How did you know I was here?”

“I heard you rustling in the bushes.”

“Impossible,” he scoffed.

“What are you doing out here, hiding in the shrubbery?” Her eyes squinted, still trying to make out who stood in the shadows.

“I was about to take my leave, but I heard your altercation. I planned on coming to your rescue.” He chuckled, despite himself. “But you seemed to have taken care of matters.”

He intentionally deepened his voice. Charlotte never noticed him when he was out in society as his real self, but they did mingle in the same circles. After all, she was the dear friend of his sister. She may treat him with disdain, but they had spoken, and it wouldn’t do for her to recognize his voice.

She took several steps in his direction, cracking a few fallen twigs in her wake. Surprise etched her features as a smile slid into place. She had seen him, and she was curious. Intrigued by the notorious Jack of Hearts.

Ah...of course she was. Of course a woman like Charlotte would be bored by merely commanding the heart of eligible bachelor, and would therefore find the excitement of a scoundrel like Jack intriguing. Besides, Jack’s robberies made

for the hottest gossip, and there was nothing Charlotte loved more than being the center of attention.

“Have a lovely evening, Miss Reed,” Jack said as he turned to leave.

“Wait,” she said. “Don’t go, yet.”

The tempo of his heart increased, and he hated it. Hated that she could still affect him despite the fact that he’d long ago given up hope that there was more to Charlotte than her beautiful facade. She was spoiled. A consummate flirt. A silly, vain girl not worthy of his time. And yet...here he was, risking much by standing here, holding a bag full of stolen jewels while wearing a mask, when he should leave. *Should* being the operative word.

“I won’t call for help,” she said.

Her words angered him. He was a thief. How could she ignore the danger to her reputation and her safety? The sheer, reckless arrogance of it...

“What makes you think you’re safe with me?”

He turned back to face her. Her rich-blue dress molded tightly to her torso, leaving little of her breasts to his imagination. Damnation, but he could easily imagine pulling down that pretty fabric and releasing those perfect globes. The color of her gown was dark enough to enhance the alabaster of her skin. She looked nearly ethereal, as if the moon itself shone merely to illuminate her beauty. Even though he doubted the dress was new, she had taken great care with her appearance. No surprise there. She was a vision.

Her brilliant smile gave pause to his breath, making his hands twitch and his gut churn. He hated the power she had over him. Still. After all this time.

She'd never smiled at him like that. Not the him she knew, at least. But to the damned thief standing before her, she bestowed the most radiant of grins.

Irritated, his voice came out naturally as a low growl. "A lady, such as yourself, shouldn't be out here alone."

"Because you're a rogue and a thief?"

No, he nearly said, because you're being singularly reckless with your safety and your reputation, regardless of who you think I am.

Her carelessness angered him almost as much as her disregard for other people's feelings. However, he didn't say it out loud, because Jack wouldn't care if she was in danger.

She took another slight step forward. She was brazen. Reckless. "You won't harm me, will you, Jack?"

The sound of that name, his *thief's* name on her lips sent a mixture of pride and anger coursing through him. He reached up to ensure his mask was firmly in place. She was flirting with him. He could see it in her face, and the way her mouth was set, the subtle batting of her lashes. Charlotte fancied him.

"You could escort me to the gardens," she suggested. "Like any gentleman could with a lady."

"I never claimed to be a gentleman." He took a step towards her.

Her head tilted down a little as if she were trying to see him more closely. "You don't have a reputation for ravishing ladies, only for theft."

"Are the two so different, then?" He knew he was playing a dangerous game, but no matter the warnings in his head, he couldn't make himself turn from her. God, she was beautiful.

She released a low laugh. “Touché.” Her voice was sultry, and if he didn’t know any better, he’d assume she was far more worldly than he knew her to be.

“Tell me, Miss Reed, are you always so forward with men?” Perhaps if he called her on her behavior, she’d cease her recklessness. Because what if he were a rogue intent on ravishing her?

She shook her head, her blue eyes never leaving his face. He would have sworn she could see right through that mask. But if that were true, she would no longer be standing in front of him. If she could see him—the real him—she would have walked away moments ago. After all, she had once described him as dreadfully dull. They barely spoke, barely tolerated one another.

“Only with men I find intriguing,” she said. Her lips curved in a slight smile, revealing the dimple in her left cheek.

Oh, the irony. Charlotte Reed was enamored with the Jack of Hearts. The untouchable beauty who had turned down countless proposals. The woman he himself had once fancied.

“Intriguing,” he repeated flatly.

She took several steps towards him. “Utterly captivated.”

Without thought to the repercussions, Jack placed one hand on her elbow and pulled her to him. She was flirting with danger and she needed to be taught a lesson. He needed to be taught a lesson. He wanted to kiss her just once to prove to himself that she wasn’t as enticing as he’d always thought.

“Captivated or not, you should be more careful where danger lurks.” And with that he leaned down and pressed his lips to hers.

He meant to kiss her as a warning, sure that the moment he kissed her, she would recoil and pull away. He had not intended to indulge his own desires, his own curiosities where she was concerned. He meant to give her a quick kiss. But at that first graze of her warm, pliant lips, all of his good intentions melted away. Moreover, instead of pulling away from him and knocking him on his ass as she had done with Winthrop, she rose onto her toes and pressed her body to his.

His hands found their way to the sides of her face and he tilted her head, deepening the kiss. She gasped and he took the opportunity of her opened mouth to slick his tongue against hers. He growled at the sensation. Damnation, but he wanted her, and this moment was the only one he'd ever get where she kissed him willingly.

Her fingers gripped the lapels of his coat and she made soft mewling noises as he continued to explore her mouth. He wanted to pull her tighter to him—feel the press of her full breasts against his chest—but then she'd feel the telltale hard ridge of his erection. She didn't need that kind of warning. Flirt, though she may be, she was still an innocent.

So as much as he longed to explore precisely how far this fancy of hers to his alter ego went, he forced himself to break away from the kiss. He took advantage of her disorientation to slip a playing card—the Jack of Hearts—into the front of her gown, before quickly turning and disappearing into the darkness.

Once seated inside the confines of his carriage, he pulled off his mask and tossed it to the other side.

“Damnation!” he roared to the emptiness.

He'd let his guard down, and with it, his ability to make smart decisions. He hadn't maintained his secret identity this

long by being foolish and reckless. Yes, it had taken considerable nerve and risk, but equal to that was the extensive planning. And tonight he'd forgotten all of that.

Moreover, now—after having kissed Charlotte Reed as Jack—he had an answer to his own, earlier question. He knew why he had continued dressing up as the Jack of Hearts for as long as he had, long after Jack had served his purpose.

He'd told himself that his own life as a rich lord of the ton bored him. That once he no longer needed the money, he still needed the adventure and excitement.

But part of him had to wonder... Once, when she'd first come out, he'd been just another one of the saps besotted with Charlotte Reed. He'd pursued her and made a fool of himself over her, only to have her dismiss him as dreadfully dull.

In the years since her rejection, he'd watched as she'd flirted with countless men, and rejected one man after another. He was glad she'd rejected him. Blinded by her beauty, he hadn't seen that they were ill-suited in every way.

Nevertheless, when he took up the mantle of Jack, he'd delighted in proving her assessment wrong. Jack was anything but dull.

He had long known that Charlotte made him weak. That his interest in her was self-indulgent, and that she was not worthy of his time or attentions. Tonight only proved what he knew and hadn't wanted to admit. Now that he'd kissed her, he had no choice but to face the truth.

It was time. Time to make Jack disappear. Time to just be himself.

Time to just be Edmond.

Two



Charlotte took her usual seat in Amelia's parlor for the weekly meeting of the Ladies' Amateur Sleuth Society. They, of course, were not an official or publicly recognized society. Instead they were merely four friends who enjoyed solving mysteries and fancied themselves novice detectives.

It had all begun with Amelia's fascination with the Sherlock Holmes stories. Then she had hooked the rest of them on the serials, and their little *Society*, somehow, had formed out of that.

They were all on time today, which was unusual because she and Meg had an affinity for being late. Well, in truth it was Meg who was often late, and since Meg served as Charlotte's ride, ergo Charlotte was late as well. Today, however, Charlotte had hired a hackney for the trip here.

She was simply too excited for today's meeting to risk missing any of it. Still, despite the thrill still coursing through her veins, she forced herself to appear calm. She was quite good at seeming calm when she wasn't.

Despite her many suitors, she had little hope of ever securing a husband. There were...complications...within her family that made marriage impossible for her. Her father's health wasn't good, and he often required attention and

comfort only she could bring. Even without that burden, she'd rejected far too many suitors at this point for her to expect a decent match. Therefore, she'd long ago resigned herself to spinsterhood.

She had little in her life or her future to look forward to, other than these meetings of the Ladies' Amateur Sleuth Society. As long as her father needed her, she couldn't accept a proposal of marriage. Knowing that, she tried to protect her heart from attachment of any kind. She didn't dare let her attention settle on any man, for that would lead to even more heartache.

She tried not to care that this behavior had earned her a reputation as the worst kind of flirt. That was easy enough, since she cared little for her own reputation, though occasionally, men like the Earl of Winthrop did use her reputation as an excuse to take liberties.

Someday her situation might change and she might be free to marry, but she knew by then, few truly eligible bachelors would consider making her an offer—certainly not any of the men her age who were looking for wives and had the resources to be selective. Those men had families wise enough to steer them clear of her. Which meant she would ultimately be left to a much older man. Most likely someone who'd already married and buried some other wife, and now wanted nothing more from his second—or possibly third—wife than someone pretty, pliant, and plowable.

Nature had blessed her with the first of those qualities, but she struggled mightily to feign the other two qualities.

She had very little in her life that brought her joy other than her friendship with these women. Very little to look forward to.

Except now, thanks to the Jack of Hearts, she had one more small—very small—thing that brought her joy. The memory of his kiss. She held that memory tight to herself as she turned to her friend Willow.

“I’m surprised you’re here today,” Charlotte said to Willow. “Shouldn’t you be packing for your honeymoon?”

“Yes, I should.” Willow beamed, the glow of her recent marriage to James Sterling, an Inspector with the Scotland Yard. “But James got assigned a new case last week and he’s right in the thick of it, so we can’t leave tomorrow as we were originally planning,” Willow said. “So I shall be here, should we happen upon a mystery of our own to solve.”

“Things have been awfully slow for us,” Amelia declared. “Were it not for the Jack of Hearts, we’d seldom have any mysteries to discuss. And even then, he has left us all in the dark for so long, I’m afraid his trail is rather cold.”

“Perhaps that’s for the best,” Willow said.

“Nonsense,” Amelia said with her characteristic bluntness. “I, for one, am still determined to unmask that rogue.”

Willow gave a huff. “If he is no longer thieving, then we will be unable to unmask him. And as you have pointed out, it’s been weeks since he’s put in an appearance. Furthermore, after we spoke to several of the ladies from whom he’d stolen at the last few gatherings, he ended up with more paste pieces than real. Hardly a crime to be pilfering fake jewels, now is it?”

Nerves bubbled inside Charlotte’s stomach. She’d been eager to share her news—all of it—but on the ride over here she’d had second thoughts. She would tell them about her interaction with him, but that kiss...that kiss was just for her.

A secret between her and Jack. She would need that secret for a long time to come. Still, she couldn't help but wonder if that was his real name. That seemed unlikely, even though it felt as if she should know his real name. Like she deserved to know it after he'd kissed her like that. Because certainly, he had to have felt all the same things she'd felt. Not merely the sensations of his lips up on hers or his tongue licking against hers. No, this had been more. She was certain there had been a fundamental connection between them that went far beyond a scoundrel stealing a heated kiss from a lady.

"I'm not so certain that his trail is cold," Charlotte said.

Meg squinted at her. "What do you know?" Then she gasped, her hand flying to her chest. "Do you know who he is?"

Charlotte could not help herself as she smiled brightly at her closest friend. "Sadly, no, I do not know his true identity, but I have met him."

"You all did, though, right? At Meg's masked ball," Willow said impatiently. "And I missed it. As usual."

"You missed it because you were out in the gardens in a heated embrace with James," Amelia pointed out.

Willow waved a hand in front of her, but could not hide her own smile.

Charlotte had to admit seeing Willow lose her heart had been fascinating. Though her friend was a beautiful woman, she'd never before attracted the attention of men. Willow was far too intelligent, too opinionated, and too focused on her own interests to lose her mind over a man. Thank goodness, Willow's family had been well enough situated that she'd

never had to temper her personality to conform to society's expectations.

As a well-renowned bluestocking, she'd never attracted the attention of ordinary, boring men of the ton. But James was different. He'd seen and appreciated all of Willow's eccentricities. Now Charlotte's friend was slightly less intense, less buttoned-up and proper, but only slightly so. Love had mellowed her.

And Charlotte was jealous. She'd give anything to be able to own herself the way Willow did. To walk into a room and not care one bit if people noticed how pretty she was. But Charlotte didn't have that luxury. She had only one defense to keep people at bay. Only one way to keep them from looking too closely at who she was, who she wasn't, and the secrets she protected.

"Out with it, Charlotte!" Meg shouted, pulling Charlotte out of her woolgathering.

"No, I didn't mean at Meg's ball," Charlotte said.

Amelia sucked in a breath. "You had another encounter with him?" The brunette slid to the edge of her seat. Out of all of them, Amelia was the most inquisitive. She'd been the one to start their group because she'd been obsessed with solving mysteries after reading the Sherlock Holmes stories. Now she wrote her own fictional detective called Lady Shadow.

Charlotte toyed with a long strand of hair. "I might have."

"Oh, stop being so coy and spill the details," Meg said.

"Pregnancy makes you impatient," Charlotte said, pointing a finger at Meg.

Meg had been Charlotte's closest friend since they had debuted together. They were about as opposite as two women

could be. Where Charlotte was tall with dark hair, Meg was petite with a riot of flaming curls.

“That is neither here nor there.” Meg poked a sweet cake into her mouth.

“Charlotte, please,” Amelia pleaded.

“Oh, very well. You are all so fun to tease, but I will end your misery. The other night at the Maybrook ball, I stepped out onto the balcony to escape the ever annoying crowd. But of course I was followed. While I was keeping Winthrop’s roaming hands and lips off of me, I heard rustling in the bushes. So after I successfully rid myself of that pest, I called out to person hiding.”

“He spoke to you?” Willow asked. Her eyes widened behind those spectacles she wore, before narrowing.

“Not only did he speak to me,” Charlotte said. “He knew my name.”

Meg nodded. “I knew it! Our suspicions that he knew you were correct.”

“What did he say?” Amelia asked.

“He claimed he was going to save me from Winthrop, but then I handled the situation myself.”

“So, he is a gentleman,” Meg said.

“I dare say that simply because he claimed he was going to save Charlotte from the likes of Winthrop doesn’t mean he’s a gentleman,” Amelia said. “He could have been intending to ravish her himself.”

A shiver of awareness surged through Charlotte’s body.

Willow turned her sharp gaze on Charlotte. “After hearing him speak, do you think you could identify him?”

Charlotte had asked herself that question a hundred times since, and had come up with no good answers. “I don’t know. On one hand, his voice sounded so familiar, yet it was not the voice of anyone I know. I even stepped into the yard to be closer to him, see if I couldn’t get a better look.”

“And?” Meg asked.

Charlotte shook her head. “Same as his voice. Seemed familiar and different all at the same time. It’s very confusing. It was too dark for me to tell the color of his eyes, and frankly the mask hoods his eyes too much to see detail. His hair was properly oiled like any gentleman’s would be, so it wasn’t distinguishable. He was taller than me. And he had an athletic build.”

“Excellent detecting skills,” Amelia declared with a clap of her hands.

Willow frowned. “It sounds as if you got rather close to him.”

Charlotte cleared her throat and willed herself not to blush. “I believe I did.”

Willow let out another huff. “He should be more careful.”

Charlotte, Meg, and Amelia all turned to stare at Willow, gaping.

“What?”

“*He* should be more careful?” Amelia asked archly. “You are not at all concerned about our dear Charlotte, but you think that the Jack of Hearts should be more careful?”

It was Willow's turn to gape. Then she snapped her mouth shut and gave a dismissive wave. "She should be more careful. That's obviously what I meant to say. I merely misspoke." She released a weak laugh. "Obviously all the late torrid nights with my husband are weakening my direction of thought."

Amelia gave a thoughtful hum as she studied Willow, before turning to Charlotte. "Well? Let's have it. What did he say to you?"

This was her opportunity. The moment she could confess to her friends that she'd allowed the renowned thief, the Jack of Hearts, to steal a kiss. And not just any kiss, but the single best kiss of her life. Despite being an unwed maiden, she'd had her share of kisses. And then some. But she didn't want them to know about this one. Not yet. She wanted to keep that moment between them as just that. A secret moment shared in the darkness.

"Yes, that was all. What was I supposed to do?" Charlotte asked.

"Rip his mask off and box his ears," Amelia said, then shrugged. "Just a suggestion."

"I cannot believe it," Meg said. "I simply cannot believe it. Do you know what this means?"

"That even the scoundrels in London find her irresistible? That even thieves want to be close to her?" Meg asked.

Amelia held one finger up. "Not what I was going to say, but interesting observation, Meg. No, what I meant was that now we can catch him."

Of course Charlotte had already thought that. They'd tried to use her as bait before, but had discovered that he never showed when she was surrounded by a passel of men. The

only other time she'd seen him, she'd been in a room full of other women.

"Precisely what I'd been thinking," Charlotte admitted.

"Do you believe he was waiting for you?" Meg asked.

Charlotte's heart skipped a beat at the thought. "No, I don't. He actually seemed as if he were on his way out. I'm not even certain he made an appearance that night. I never heard anyone mention it."

Willow tapped a finger on her lips. "There was nothing about it in the papers," she said. "At least not for the Maybrook ball. There was a report that he robbed a group of ladies at a concert that very evening."

"You read the papers even during your wedding?" Charlotte asked.

"Certainly not during the ceremony, but one should keep abreast of the world around them. It would do me no good to lock myself away in a room with James and not pay attention to anything outside," Willow said.

"Ah, but it would be fun," Amelia interjected with a wink.

Willow shrugged, but could not hide a smile. "That I cannot deny," she said quietly.

Ugh. Charlotte didn't want to listen to her friends discuss their wedded bliss. Yes, that made her selfish, but that seemed slightly better than envious. She was happy that her three dear friends had found love matches in their prospective husbands, but sometimes it was painful to observe their unrestrained happiness, knowing the grim future that awaited her.

"Back to our plan," Charlotte said trying to redirect their conversation. "I suggest that at future social engagements, I

make myself available, so to speak, and see if he does not seek me out. Now that we've spoken, perhaps he'll feel less guarded."

Meg snorted. "I suspect he'll want more than a conversation next time. Perhaps he'll steal a kiss."

Charlotte felt her cheeks warm and knew she blushed. It wasn't something that happened often. She'd done her very best to desensitize herself to embarrassment because she was so fair-complected that a blush was like a spotlight on her cheeks. Thankfully Amelia interjected.

"Make yourself available? How shall you do that?" she asked.

"I suspect she means to stand around alone as much as possible," Meg said.

"Precisely," Charlotte agreed.

"That might present a significant challenge," Willow said. "You tend to be surrounded by suitors quite often."

"They are beginning to lessen," Charlotte admitted. She'd noticed it more and more lately. One man here, another there, her crowd was thinning. She'd finally done precisely what her mother had been warning her about for years—made herself so unattainable no one even tried to win her. But at least that had kept her family's secret quiet. If people assumed she was a shameless flirt out to snag the perfect gentleman, then she'd welcome that assumption. It was better than the alternative. "Frannie has been getting more than her share of attention now that she's come out. In fact, I do believe Lord Blaire has set his cap for her. We will both be joining him in his box at the opera later this week."

“You could still have your pick,” Meg assured her. “All you would need to do was tell the right sort of people that you were ready to wed and the men would line up. The gossips in this town would eat up that tidbit.”

Amelia and Willow nodded.

Charlotte, however, was not so certain. She waved them off, not wanting to further discuss her marital status.

Amelia eyed her, then nodded as if she sensed Charlotte’s need to change the subject. “So the plan is that you will try to make yourself more available to our dear boy, Jack, in hopes that he will speak with you again?” Amelia asked.

Charlotte nodded.

“Then what?” Willow asked.

“Well, I suppose I shall endeavor to persuade him to come close enough for me to tear off his mask,” Charlotte suggested, trying to hide her pounding heart. Last night she’d been close enough that she could have ripped off his mask and yet she hadn’t. She’d been too entranced by his kiss.

“He might be prepared for that,” Willow said.

Amelia’s brow wrinkled. “You should be careful with such a plan though. If you get too close, he could take liberties.”

Charlotte scratched at her cheek.

“That would be quite damaging to one’s reputation,” Willow pointed out.

“True, but Jack is so fashionable,” Meg said. “Compromised with the Jack of Hearts, can you imagine?”

Charlotte had no intention of compromising herself with anyone. She might be the only one among her friends left

unmarried, but she would not use trickery to snare a husband.

Willow leveled a bespectacled gaze on her. “Well, I hope you’re not planning to go quite that far,” she said.

“No,” Charlotte said. “Not that far. I only want to know who he is.” That wasn’t entirely honest. She wanted more than to know his true identity. She wanted to know if he’d kiss her again, and if their kiss had just been one among many for him.

She could easily imagine a man like the Jack of Hearts kissing women all over London and the idea was more distressing than she cared for. She preferred to imagine he had picked her specifically. She forced herself to sit on her hands so she would not rub at her lips absently, remembering the press of his. She shivered at the delicious memory of his tongue caressing her own.

She had danced with countless men since her come out, and a few had stolen kisses, but none had stirred her body the way Jack had. His kiss had elicited reactions in her skin she’d never before experienced.

Admittedly, she’d always liked the thought of the Jack of Hearts, the daring rogue who swept in and took people’s jewels while they stood there and allowed it. But her brief encounter had been more than that. He had almost stepped in to save her. Certainly that said something significant about his character. Granted she hadn’t needed saving, but he’d stood there, and waited until he knew she was safe. Her heart raced just thinking about it. He was a thief with a noble streak and that contradiction was compelling. She wanted to know more about him.

The rest of the meeting flew by with nothing but an exchange of gossip. These days the investigations they worked on had all but disappeared. Amelia was busy writing her Lady

Shadow adventures, and being married to an inspector indulged her curiosity for real mysteries. Willow had nearly the same with her detective husband who worked for the Scotland Yard. Meg had never been all that interested in mysteries, and had her hands full now that she was with child.

Three of them had lived adventures that resulted in marriage. Charlotte could pretend it was her turn, that she need only identify a mystery to solve, and it would lead her to her husband. But deep down, she knew that was not her fate.

Three



The following evening, Charlotte smiled coyly at the duke who currently spun her around the dance floor. Her dance card was full and she intended to make the most of each opportunity. This was investigative work, after all.

The girls wanted her to make herself available for more interactions with Jack. He was too careful to approach her in the middle of a brightly lit ballroom. And she couldn't very well spend the entire evening loitering on the dark balconies. Instead, she decided to use her keen skills of observation to see if she could identify who Jack was when he wasn't...well, Jack. When he was his regularly gentlemanly self. They'd already determined that he had to be a member of Society, else he wouldn't be able to move so freely about them the way he had.

The duke smiled back at her and she tried not to wince at the sight of his yellowing teeth. Aside from that, he was somewhat handsome. At least he still had all his hair. He was obviously not her Jack.

Oh, who was she kidding? The duke was an utter troll with his pointy beak-like nose and his terrible teeth. The dance ended—finally—and the duke, without one single word, led her back to her party.

“The Dire Duke? Honestly Charlotte, surely you could have scrounged up a better dance partner than that,” Frannie whispered once the man was out of earshot.

Charlotte took a fortifying breath and shrugged. “He asked.” She couldn’t tell her sister what she was doing tonight.

Frannie’s features scrunched and she narrowed her gaze. “You’ve declined before. You’re notorious for it. Don’t you enjoy flirting with men, making them love you, and then breaking their hearts?”

Stung, she studied her younger sister. “Is that what you really think of me?”

Frannie shrugged. “You claim to want grand love and passion, but it seems to me, perhaps you just enjoy the chase too much to settle down.”

Charlotte winced as her own words were flung back at her. She’d been saying those very words for years. They weren’t true, but they seemed plausible enough to be believed. She knew that if her family suspected she made her decisions based on her need to protect them, her mother would have a fit. And look what it had resulted in.

Too hurt to admit to Frannie exactly how much she despised the chase, she plastered on a smile and waved her hand dramatically. “Oh, Frannie, honestly, those kinds of love are so rare.”

Frannie frowned, then her pretty features softened with concern. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing at all.” She looked up to scan the room, not really seeing anything amidst the blur of faces, just not wanting to look at her sister. Not wanting Frannie to see the truth she tried so desperately to protect.

Her sister's elbow jabbed her ribs. "It appears that Lord Carrolton is fast approaching for his waltz. I'm not certain he's the one for you, but a much better specimen than your last partner."

Charlotte glanced up, found Lord Carrolton headed in her direction, and agreed with her sister. He was pleasant-enough looking and charming.

To distract herself from the sting of her conversation with Frannie, she reminded herself that she was supposed to be looking for Jack.

She swallowed her nerves. There was nothing to be nervous about. She'd danced with hundreds of men and tonight was not any different. Granted she'd never before pursued a thief. Was there anything in Lord Carrolton's appearance that could identify him as Jack? He was tall and well-built, though his hair seemed paler than Jack's.

"Miss Reed," the earl said as he reached her side. "I do believe our dance is next."

She flashed him a smile. "Indeed it is." She allowed him to take her arm as he escorted her to the dance floor.

"You are looking rather fetching tonight, Miss Reed," he said once the music had begun.

"Thank you." She looked up to meet his eyes. A flicker of recognition and something in the way he said her name. Could he be the Jack of Hearts? Her heart quickened at the thought, and her eyes immediately fell to his mouth. She searched it for something familiar. Had that been the mouth that had so tantalizingly slid across hers?

"Have you been enjoying the unseasonably warm weather?" he asked. His rich voice skimmed across ears.

But had she heard that timbre before? “I have. The sunshine has been most pleasant.”

“And the moonlight is equally lovely,” he said.

She felt her eyes widen. It fit. He had the same athletic build and the appropriate ties to get into all of the opera houses, theatre boxes, balls and soirees that Jack had made his hunting grounds. The only thing that didn’t make sense was that she knew for a fact that Lord Carrolton was rather wealthy. Why would he need to steal jewels? That and his blonde locks, but wet hair was always darker, wasn’t it? So with the right amount of pomade, his hair could appear brownish.

Perhaps Willow could assist with that puzzle; she was always so keen with that sort of thing.

“The moonlight, my lord?” Charlotte asked.

“We’ve had such clear skies of late, and the moon has been bright and bold in the sky,” he said.

“One would hardly need a lamp to find his way around in the darkness then,” she said.

He paused for a moment, then his lips quirked slightly before speaking. “I suppose that would be true.”

Well, he certainly wasn’t giving anything away. Far be it from her to question good fortune if Jack pursued her as his true self. Encouraging his attention would only keep him near so she could continue to investigate, to see if he were, in fact, Jack.

“My lord, I very much enjoy riding in the park,” she said.

He smiled slowly. “Do you, Miss Reed? Well, it just so happens that I have a rig for such an occasion. But only if you

cease calling me 'my lord' and use my Christian name. Michael."

She inclined her head slightly. Men preferred bashful women, and while she'd never been particularly shy, she had learned how to pretend to be. It was generally effective.

"Michael," she said. "And you may call me Charlotte."

"Perhaps you would join me some afternoon this week, Charlotte," he said.

"I would like that very much."

Before they could continue their conversation, the song ended and he released her.

"I shall call upon you," he said. With a bow, he stepped away. Rather quickly too. He did have a rather mysterious quality about him. Something about him made her uneasy, but she couldn't pin down exactly what.

Charlotte maneuvered her way through the crowd until she returned to her party. Her sister was nowhere to be seen, no doubt she'd be found on the dance floor. In her place though was Willow and her brother, Edmond.

"And how is Lord Carrolton this evening?" Willow asked as Charlotte approached.

Edmond, on the other hand, gave a dismissive once-over before returning his gaze to the dance floor.

"Rather curious, if you ask me." She swiped a glass of champagne from a passing footman's tray and took a healthy sip. "A perfect candidate for Jack. But that does propose a question," she said.

"What question?" Willow asked.

“Why would a man as wealthy as Carrolton need to steal? That simply makes no sense at all,” Charlotte said.

“Carrolton is not as wealthy as he would like people to believe,” Edmond muttered, not taking his gaze off the dance floor.

Willow nudged her brother’s side. “What do you know?”

He shrugged casually. “Only what I’ve heard.” He eyed his glass of champagne, then his sister. “No gossip, I can assure you. I merely have heard that he keeps up appearances, but that he recently lost a hefty sum of money in an unfortunate investment.”

“What sort of investment?” Charlotte asked.

Edmond’s eyes met hers and for the first time since she’d known him, she noted their color. She’d always assumed they were simply brown, like Willow’s. But on closer inspection, she could identify several flecks of gold woven through them. The realization flooded her with warmth, as if she’d discovered an intimate secret. A strange reaction, to be sure, as she’d looked at Edmond hundreds of times over the years. Since she and Willow had first become friends, nearly a decade before. But the full weight of his gaze was unnerving. Not uncomfortable, but knowing, as if he could see inside her. She tried to pull her gaze away, but found herself unwilling or unable to do so.

“I really couldn’t say,” he said. His tone was even, but if she were betting, she’d wager he was angry with her, or at the least irritated. Which was preposterous considering she’d done nothing to him. But she’d often suspected that Edmond did not approve of her. He rarely spoke to her, and when he did, he was concise, his tone terse. Polite, but cold.

“I should be going,” he said.

“You could entertain me a bit longer while James is preoccupied in the billiard room,” Willow said.

“Oh drat,” Charlotte murmured.

“What’s the matter?” Willow asked.

“Winthrop,” Charlotte said through her teeth. “I believe he’s going to attempt to woo me properly tonight with a dance and I simply do not have the patience to endure him.”

“Find another partner,” Edmond suggested as if the solution were blatantly obvious.

“Excellent idea,” Willow said.

Charlotte rolled her eyes. “Or I could take my leave and get some fresh air on the balcony.”

“That seems like a terrible idea,” Willow said. “The weather could turn at a moment’s notice.” Then she grabbed her brother’s elbow. “Edmond, dance with her and save her from Winthrop and his wandering lips.”

Charlotte once again found herself looking up into Edmond’s honey-flecked eyes. His jawline ticked, but he held his elbow out to her and she took it right as Winthrop would have reached their group.

“Miss Reed,” he called.

But Edmond swept Charlotte into his arms in a graceful and elegant move she hadn’t been expecting.

“This is a waltz,” she said dumbly.

“I am well aware. I believe I might even recognize the composer of this particular piece.”

“I meant no offense. It’s only that I don’t think I’ve ever seen you dance.”

His hands mold perfectly to the small of her back, the other holding hers aloft. His movements are effortless as he guided her among the other dancing couples.

“I refrain from dancing by choice, not by lack of skill,” he said.

“I can see that now. You’re quite talented. Elegant even,” she said, then met his gaze. Why was she complimenting him? And why was she suddenly feeling so awkward and flustered? More than likely it was simply because she knew that Edmond did not care for her company. And she was accustomed to men going out of their way to flirt and flatter her. Not scowl at her.

“My apologies that politeness forced you to dance with me.”

“I believe it was my sister rather more than anything else. And your apparent dislike for Lord Winthrop.”

She wasn’t going to give Edmond any details regarding Winthrop. “Still I know how much you dislike this kind of social frivolity in general. Not to mention your general dislike of me.”

“Why would you assume I dislike you?”

“Oh, Edmond, there is no need to pretend. I am not daft, nor do we need to stand on pretense. Did you think that I wouldn’t notice how you make your leave every time I approach a group? Or how, when you cannot easily get away, you scowl at me the entire time we’re near one another?”

“Am I scowling now?” he asked.

“As a matter of fact, yes. You are.” Only, as she stared up at him, she realized this wasn’t his normal scowl. Yes, his expression was serious, his gaze dark with some unspoken emotion. But he didn’t seem annoyed. He seemed...brooding. And attractive. Dangerously attractive. She swallowed thickly.

The song came to an end and they stood there facing one another.

“Perhaps that is simply my face.” His lips quirked and she could have sworn he was hiding a grin.

A smile tugged at Charlotte’s lips. “Did you make a jest, Edmond? Are you ill?”

His honey-colored eyes lifted heavenward. “I do have a sense of humor, Charlotte. Perhaps you don’t know me as well as you think you do.” He took her elbow and steered her back towards where Willow stood.

He leaned down and kissed his sister’s cheek. “I’m afraid I must take my leave.” Then he reached for Charlotte’s hand. “Charlotte, always a pleasure,” he said, then he placed his hot mouth to her hand.

Well, not so much her hand, but the naked flesh at her wrist right above her glove. The warmth of his breath singed her skin and she nearly closed her eyes to enjoy it. But it was gone so quickly, she’d missed the opportunity. Still, her skin remained heated as if his kiss had permanently marked her.

Charlotte tried to formulate a response, but words were not gathering fast enough. What was the matter with her? Since when did she notice Edmond’s eyes and nearly swoon over a simple kiss to her wrist? No doubt her anxiousness was making her scattered and jittery. That’s all this was. Her body was simply over sensitized because of Jack.

“He was clearly irritated with me,” Charlotte mused. She should not care. She’s certainly noticed his indifference before, but had never allowed it to bother her. So it shouldn’t matter now how he treated her, even though somehow, inexplicably, it did.

“Lord Carrolton?” Willow asked.

“What?”

“You said Lord Carrolton was irritated with you,” Willow said.

Charlotte shook her head. “No, Edmond.”

Willow’s mouth opened, then closed. She frowned. “Doubtful.” She looked over her shoulder in the direction her brother had walked, as if she’d be able to still see him. “It is probably more that he doesn’t enjoy these types of functions. He’s not very comfortable in crowds.”

“Why?” Charlotte found herself asking.

“I’m not exactly certain why, but I know he never has been. He doesn’t like large groups of people.”

It was then that Amelia and Meg found them.

How had Charlotte never known that about Edmond and crowds? Evidently there were multiple things she’d never before noticed about Willow’s brother. Just as he’d accused. She clearly did not know him well at all.

Not that she needed to be cataloging Edmond’s qualities and quirks. Well, it mattered not. Besides, she knew when someone was annoyed with her and he had been. Strange.

“If you suspect Lord Carrolton to be the Jack of Hearts,” Meg said, “then perhaps you should encourage his attentions and see if you can’t identify any secrets.”

Where had that come from? Had they had an entire discussion without her while she'd been woolgathering about Willow's brother? Good heavens. Thankfully, Meg reminded her about her intentions.

"Take heed though," Amelia said. "You don't want to tangle too closely should he prove to be dangerous."

"We are supposed to go riding sometime this week. I shall be careful," Charlotte said. "I promise."

"Perhaps you should take Frannie with you, just to be on the safe side," Meg suggested.

Charlotte considered that for a moment, then shook her head. "I don't think he'll be honest with me and possibly slip on any secrets he's hiding if we have company. Besides, my plan is to get him to kiss me. Since I've kissed Jack, I should be able to tell once I've kissed him if he is the same man." Then she realized what she'd said and popped a hand over her mouth. She squeezed her eyes closed and hoped that Willow, in particular, wouldn't notice. But of course that would be like hoping Willow wouldn't share her opinion.

"What do you mean you've kissed him?" Willow asked, turning her entire body to face Charlotte. As if that wasn't enough, she grabbed Charlotte's arm and pulled her further away from the bustling ballroom.

Amelia and Meg followed along until the four of them were alone in a small sitting room.

Charlotte waved her hand dismissively. "It was nothing," she hissed. "I shouldn't have even mentioned it." That was a lie. That kiss had been all she had thought about for days. So passionate, and hinted at pleasures she could only dream of.

Willow held one hand up. “Charlotte,” she whisper-yelled. “You kissed the most notorious thief in London and you say it was nothing!”

Meg bounced on the balls of her feet and clapped her hands quietly. “This is most exciting.”

Charlotte exhaled slowly. “It was the night at the Maybrook ball. Out in the moonlight.”

“And he just kissed you?” Amelia asked. “You left that detail out at our meeting.”

“Yes, and yes, I did.”

Willow blew out a breath. “That was bold of him.”

“I know. But don’t you see that this gives me a way to potentially identify him?” Charlotte asked.

Willow’s eyes widened and her brows shot up. “Please tell me your plan is not to kiss men all over London to compare?”

Meg laughed. “Only you, Charlotte.”

“Hopefully it won’t come to that, but it might be the only way we’ll know for certain,” Charlotte said with a wince.

“I hope not, for your sake,” Willow said. “Else you may find your reputation in tatters.”

Four



Edmond picked up the mask one more time and stuffed it into his pocket. With determined strides, he crossed his bedroom and made his way outside to the waiting carriage. It had been more than two weeks since he'd last gone out as Jack. The same night he'd kissed Charlotte. A week since he'd danced with her as himself.

After the moonlight kiss he'd decided to end his tenure as the Jack of Hearts. He'd had enough. His adventures as Jack had ended with him kissing that infuriating woman.

As far as he'd been concerned, the matter had been settled.

But then the unthinkable had happened. The Jack of Hearts made another appearance. On an evening Edmond had spent sharing a quiet dinner with his parents. Someone else had stepped out, masquerading as the Jack of Hearts.

When Edmond had first read the news of Jack's latest robbery, he'd been amused. Confused, yes, but mostly amused. No one knew he was the original Jack of Hearts. No one could possibly connect him to Jack's previous actions, so what did he care if some new rogue took over the identity? After all, he was done with it.

Except...there was Charlotte.

Beautiful, reckless Charlotte Reed, wandering off into darkened gardens and kissing masked men.

He shouldn't care who she kissed— no, he *didn't* care who she kissed— but the idea of her kissing some other masked man, believing she was kissing him, that was untenable.

This other man may not be as gentlemanly as he was. This new Jack couldn't be trusted with Charlotte's virtue.

She was still his sister's best friend and he would be damned if she found herself hurt because he'd impetuously kissed her.

So tonight, he had one more thing to accomplish as Jack... warn Charlotte that she shouldn't allow masked strangers to take liberties with her. The very last thing he'd want is for her to be assaulted because she trusted the wrong man. She might be a spoiled girl used to getting precisely what she wanted, whenever she wanted it, but he didn't want any harm to befall her.

There had been a time when he'd fancied himself in love with her. They'd been younger then. She and Willow had come out the same year, and though it had taken more than one Season for them to become friends, he had noticed Charlotte immediately. Of course he'd noticed her. Every man had noticed Charlotte.

But unlike other men, Edmond had always found it difficult to talk to strangers and that year had been no different. Still he'd done his level best to try to court her before another man snagged her. But his efforts had been awkward at best, painful at their worst. She'd walked in the gardens with him once, but his conversation skills had been sorely lacking. So when he'd proposed marriage after knowing her for only a handful of weeks, she'd politely declined.

They'd never spoken of that day again. He wasn't even certain she remembered. There had been so many proposals since his. Every one of them declined. Which begged the question—what the devil was she waiting on?

He had to assume that she simply enjoyed being pursued too much to settle for one man.

He'd taken that rejection of hers and had forced himself to change. He'd realized that even if he had to pretend, he needed to appear comfortable enough in social settings. He needed to be able to, at the very least, carry on simple conversations. He'd originally intended to use those changes to woo her again, properly this time. But as he'd watched her, he'd realized she wasn't worth it. Wasn't worth his time and effort. That didn't mean she didn't deserve a warning to be more careful with her person. He shuddered to think what would happen if that other thief got her alone.

He knew she'd be at the opera tonight with her sister and a few friends. It didn't take him long to arrive at the opera house. His plan was a simple one. He'd maneuver through the crowds—without his mask—find her, then wait for right opportunity for Jack to appear. However, when he arrived and scanned the sea of faces, he cursed himself for not arriving sooner so he could have waited against the wall as the crowd arrived.

God, he hated crowds. The noise, the smells, it was a barrage to his senses that made him want to pluck at his collar, loosen his cravat. The lobby area was packed with noise and bodies. Perfume and tobacco clung to the air in an odd and rather cloying mixture. He desperately wanted to flee and take refuge outside in the cool night air. But he swallowed the sensations scratching at his skin and continued looking around.

Deep, steady breathing was what he needed to focus on. It was what worked for him in these moments when he wanted nothing more than to disappear.

Then he spotted her. Tall and graceful, dressed in a cream-colored gown that molded to every inch of her curvaceous flesh. The square neckline delved low enough to reveal sumptuous décolletage, and the tiny lace fringe seemed to tickle her creamy flesh. Her breasts weren't overly large, but perfectly rounded and pert; her waist narrow, and though he'd never seen them, he knew her legs would be long and shapely. Ultimately, she had a body that made men want her and women want to be her.

Her silky black locks were piled atop her head in an ornate confection, leaving her long, graceful neck completely bare. He knew that her hair was too heavy and too thick to take the fashionable curls. And it took very little of his imagination to see that raven curtain barely covering her pale breasts. Her hardened nipples peeking through the ebony strands.

He wanted nothing more than to nuzzle that sweet spot right below her ear. To breathe in her sweet scent, nibble a path down to her collarbone.

Christ, what was wrong with him? He could not have Charlotte. He did not even want Charlotte.

Yes, she was beautiful. But outward beauty didn't always translate to anything substantial for someone's character. And outward beauty was all Charlotte possessed. Underneath that beauty, Charlotte was a spoiled brat.

The electrical lights crackled, then flickered, alerting everyone to find their seats. The crowd shuffled towards the doors that would gain them entrance into the prime viewing boxes with their velvet-covered seats. The more pedestrian

seats down below were wooden and woefully uncomfortable for long performances.

Various shoes clamoring against the marble floors belied the supposed genteel nature of the crowd. Edmond clenched his jaw and took a deep breath. Would that he could simply disappear to the wide-open English countryside. After this, perhaps he could simply retire from social life all together. He wasn't needed any longer to protect his sister since she was now a happily married woman. A feat he'd never expected to happen. Willow had never been particularly interested in men, focusing all of her energy on caring for their ailing mother since their father was well into his years now. But leaving London would heap all of the family worries into his sister's lap and he wouldn't do that to her.

Edmond kept his eyes on the statuesque brunette and noticed she was currently walking with his sister. He hadn't known Willow would be in attendance tonight. That might complicate things, but more than likely it wouldn't. For the most part, he, as Jack, had been able to avoid being in the same room as his sister. Mask or not, she'd know him instantly. Willow was observant and annoyingly clever.

Charlotte and Willow were clearly having a friendly debate about something as they made their way through the red-and-gilded doors. That was their way. He needed to know where Charlotte was sitting, but he kept enough distance so that neither woman would see him. He crept into the noisy theatre, nodding at acquaintances as he went.

None of them knew his secret identity or the fact that he had stolen from a great many of them. He couldn't deny that it still thrilled him that he could enter this establishment as Edmond Mabson, heir to Viscount Saddler, then become the

rakish Jack of Hearts and free them of their baubles without them having any idea who he was underneath that simple, black mask.

That was the way with Society. It was not an advantage he'd considered when he'd started this charade, but it quickly became evident. They simply did not want him to be caught; that would ruin their fun. Certainly there were some who were outraged by his behavior, his sister for one, but most perceived him and his petty thieving as little more than a parlor trick. Though his theft had served a greater purpose. One that had refilled his family's fortune—a fortune that rightfully belonged to them—long ago lost on one of his mother's more dangerous whims. The rest of the jewels he'd taken, the ones who belonged to other people, he still had those. Stashed away in his home waiting to be returned, but he still had not quite figured out how to do that.

As if Charlotte could sense someone watching her, she turned around to search the crowd, but Edmond slipped into the shadows while everyone continued to their seats. When he stepped back out, she had disappeared.



THE LIGHTS IN THE OPERA HOUSE DIMMED AND CHARLOTTE SAT back, rolling the edge of her program into a small tube between her fingers. It was lovely to sit in the boxed seats; they were far more comfortable and plush than the unforgiving wood of the general seating below. And it gave her a better advantage to scan the room in hopes of identifying Jack.

She and Willow had each agreed to do so once seated in their respective boxes. Willow had sternly lectured her on the

importance of not being too reckless in her quest to unmask Jack. As many times as that infernal kiss had replayed in her mind over the last two weeks, she had almost convinced herself that she would be able to recognize him. That the mere sound of his voice, or the curl of his lips, something would register and she'd realize his true identity. So far that had not happened. She'd been staring at men's mouths so much in the last couple of days though that she had realized there were an astonishing number of gentlemen in London with bad teeth.

She held up her opera glasses and surveyed the boxes opposite her. Surely someone who stole so many jewels could afford a box at the opera. Thankfully, some light remained, so she was able to make out most of the people. In one box she found Lord Sandifer, a handsome man, but far too old to be Jack. His two sons were seated next to him, but one was too fat and the other too short. Come to think of it, neither of those boys looked like their father. Perhaps Lady Sandifer shared her favors with other men in town. Charlotte knew such things happened between married couples, but it had always bothered her. Her parents had never strayed from one another, despite their vast age differences and their struggles, and she respected them both for it.

Onward to the next box. Mr. Padgett, not an aristocrat, but he moved in their circles due to his extreme wealth. He certainly had the right build, athletic like Jack, but something in the way he moved didn't seem right. His mannerisms didn't seem to align with what she'd noticed of Jack. Still, she made a mental note to keep him on her list.

Continuing on, she passed one of the most powerful matriarchs in society and her four daughters, but no men in sight. Then onto Lord Jasper and Viscount Terrydale who sat together. Closely together. Interesting.

Her sister poked her in the ribs.

“What?” she whispered.

“Pay attention,” Frannie whispered, then motioned to the stage. “You’re looking in the wrong direction and people are going to notice.”

Charlotte noted that Lord Blaine sat attentively watching the performance.

She looked back at the stage, but simply could not concentrate on the opera. She’d not yet seen *Don Giovanni*, the famed opera by Mozart, and had always found the tale of the great lover, Don Juan, of interest, but tonight her mind wandered too much. And, in truth, she’d rather read a book about the elusive seducer than listen to the words sung in Italian. Perhaps she should excuse herself for a moment to clear her head.

“I have a bit of a headache, and it’s distracting me,” Charlotte whispered. “I’m just going to step out for some air. I’ll return shortly.”

Frannie frowned, but nodded as she turned her attention back to the performance.

Charlotte stood and quietly inched her way through the curtains at the back of the seating box. The lighting was still rather dim as she made her way along the empty corridor beyond. Using the program, she fanned herself. It was unseasonably warm outside and that wasn’t helping the heated temperature in here.

“Miss Reed, I do believe you might be following me,” a voice said from behind her.

Her stomach plummeted to her feet. She stilled. She knew that voice. She closed her eyes and inhaled slowly before

turning to face him. He stood much closer than she anticipated. She swallowed and hoped her voice would not betray her nerves. “Perhaps it is you who follows me, sir.” Her heart beat a rapid tattoo.

Jack smiled a crooked smile, one full of arrogance and mischief. “Perhaps so.”

“I can assure you I have no jewels worth stealing,” she said, pointing to her empty throat. “This,” she pointed to the large jeweled pin at her bosom, “is nothing more than paste and cut glass.”

He chuckled, but she detected no real humor in his laugh. “I am not after your jewels.” He said nothing more, but continued to eye her as if there was more to be said. As if he were, in fact, after *something* when it came to her.

In vain, she tried to think of something clever to say, but words failed her. She wished she could see his eyes more closely. Detect the precise shade. As it was, she couldn’t even determine if they were light or dark. Same with his hair. As with any fashionable gentleman, there was so much pomade slicking it back, it could have been any color. And the dimness of their current hiding place wasn’t helping matters.

A shiver raced down the back of her legs.

“How is Lord Blaine this evening?” he inquired.

She frowned. “How did you—”

Again his lips quirked in a grin. “I saw you earlier. He has a lovely box.”

“Yes, the seats are quite nice.”

“Precisely the kind you deserve I suppose,” he said and she thought she detected a hint of derision in his tone.

“I would love to take the credit, but I’m afraid, I am only accompanying my sister this evening. It is she who has caught Lord Blaire’s eye,” Charlotte said.

He tsked his tongue. “While your sister is quite pretty, I have always preferred raven-colored hair to the fashionable blondes.” He reached out and wrapped his finger around one of the strands brushing her shoulders.

She’d been flattered before, so many times that normally compliments fell flat. But coming from him, those words seemed to actually hit their mark, permeating her skin. As if she were being told for the very first time that she was pretty. Her pulse sped and nerves agitated the insides of her stomach.

“Do tell your sister to take care, though. Lord Blaire has quite the reputation,” he said.

She snorted, unladylike as possible and she resisted the urge to roll her eyes at herself. Good heavens. “Are you, the famed masked thief, warning against another man’s reputation?”

He lifted a shoulder in a casual shrug. “Merely a suggestion. Though I did seek you out for a specific reason tonight.”

“To warn me about my sister’s suitor?”

“No. But rather to warn you against your impetuous behavior of allowing rogues to steal your kisses. You should take greater care with your safety.”

She raised her brows slowly. “That is rather rich coming from you, is it not? You being the one who stole the kiss in question.”

“Precisely, but you should know I am not the only masked thief in London.” His voice took on a hard note. “While you

are...relatively safe with me, you cannot always be certain of who you find yourself cornered with.”

“Relatively safe?” Why was her heart beating so quickly? And why did it feel as if she had a herd of deer trampling through her stomach? What did that mean? Did he have intentions to ravish her? She should not enjoy that thought. Still, delicious tingles scattered through her body. “Whatever do you mean by that?”

“Only that here in this darkened corridor, I could take liberties with you.”

She swallowed. Was it her imagination that his gaze was burning holes through her gown, blazing a path down her naked flesh? Her nipples tightened. Her breathing quickened. She could not possibly want him to take liberties with her. Could she? She should be afraid, yet she wasn't. A true lady would be frightened and appalled, yet she knew deep into her soul there was nothing to fear from the man in front of her. He seemed familiar. Almost comfortable to be around. But that didn't make any sense.

“I trust you,” she said, her voice coming out in barely a whisper.

“You shouldn't.” His tone was teasing, but something else as well. Something darker and more predatory. “I could have my hands up your skirts in a manner of seconds. Despite your many layers, I would wager your drawers are split and I could easily have my way with you.”

She sucked in a breath, uncertain if she were appalled or aroused. This man was surprising. He was a masked man—a thief—and he was merely toying with her. She wanted very much to throw caution to the wind, close her eyes and lean into him, but her feet would not move.

Still, she had a task to complete. Namely to unveil his identity. Here, she had the perfect opportunity for that, she need only maintain her focus.

She might not be able to lean in for a kiss, but she could certainly attempt to entice him into stealing one. Slowly, she looked up at him and bit into her lower lip. “If you have a preference for me—as I’m assuming that’s what you were implying with your comment about raven hair—why would you not simply tell me who you are?” She slicked her tongue out and moistened her lips.

His eyes traveled down her face and landed on her mouth. And she could have sworn she heard him growl. “If only it were that simple.” Then he pulled her close to him and leaned in for a kiss.

This time, he moved across her lips with a bit more fervor. *Don’t forget your agenda.* Deftly, he nibbled and suckled her bottom lip, his tongue sliding across the seam of her mouth until she opened for him. *Don’t forget your agenda.* She tentatively brushed her tongue against his and the sensation surged desire, hot and wet, through her body, landing in her core. *Don’t forget your agenda.* She gripped the sides of his arms and leaned further into him. Her hardened nipples grazed his chest, and she couldn’t help but release a small moan of pleasure at the sensation.

She was losing control of the situation and nearly herself. Kissing him was not her task, only the means to accomplish said task. Her body did not want that reminder. No, her traitorous body wanted to rub against him like a wanton. Good heavens, she needed to unmask him before he debauched her right here in the darkened corridor of the opera house.

With a swift movement, she reached up to the side of his face, right above his ear where the band of the mask rested. She had barely placed a finger on it before he grabbed her wrist firmly and held her out in front of him.

“Very crafty, Miss Reed, but not tonight.” And with that, he turned and left her standing stunned and alone, her lips swollen and her body still humming with desire.



EDMOND TORE OFF THE MASK ONCE HE WAS SEATED INSIDE THE dark confines of his carriage. He should not have been surprised by Charlotte’s boldness, or her curiosity. He was the one who kept stealing her kisses; she certainly had a right to know who he was for taking such liberties. Then again, she had deliberately enticed him tonight. She’d known exactly what she was doing. Persuading him to kiss her all so she could unmask him. He was a damned fool.

His cock was still hard, still aching for more. He tore at the placket of his trousers, unfastening enough to withdraw his hardened length. He paused long enough to tug off his gloves, then spat in his palm before gripping his shaft. There was no mercy used as he tugged and shuttled, nearly punishing himself for wanting her as much as he did.

Edmond rested his head back on the seat behind him and squeezed his eyes shut. Curse her for poisoning him the way she had. Pleasure coiled up his spine and his bollocks drew tighter.

“Charlotte, damn you,” he whispered in the dark.

Grabbing his handkerchief, he held it to the tip of his cock to collect his spend. His climax rocked through him and he hissed her name once more through his teeth.

He ignored the low boil of shame heating his stomach. Tonight was the last time he'd touch Charlotte Reed. It had to be. He'd accomplished his task. Warned her of the other thief.

What was it about her that drew him in, despite knowing she was nothing more than shallow, selfish girl?

She was beneath him in every way that should matter to him. She flirted with every man who crossed her path. She seemed incapable of anything deeper or more permanent than a flirtation. Yet her beauty bewitched him.

He long ago gave up hoping she might be better than an empty, but visually appealing, ornament. He didn't expect anything more than that from her, but he damn well expected himself to have better taste than that. Better sense than that.

He'd be damned if her kiss would be the only to stir his passions. He was an eligible bachelor; it would not be so difficult to find a bride should he decide he needed one. His sister and mother had been pestering him about that very thing for years. Once he was married to another woman, his desire for Charlotte would wane, and then finally disappear.

All kisses aside, tonight had been about one thing only. The end of the Jack of Hearts. Three months ago, he'd finally retrieved the last of the jewels he'd sought, the jewels that rightfully belonged to his family. Yes, the time had come for Jack to disappear, and with him, his desire for Charlotte Reed.

Five



Charlotte had not slept well at all. The thoughts Jack's second kiss had plagued her mind and sleep had been difficult. What little she had gotten had been riddled with strangely erotic dreams of Edmond, of all people, which had made her feel flustered and off-kilter all morning.

She'd finally crawled out of bed and made notes on her observations from the opera the night before. Observations not related to Jack's stolen kiss, or his mysterious threat about not being the only masked thief in town. She had just finished jotting down something about Lord Winthrop when there was a scratch at the door.

The lady's maid she shared with her mother and sister came into her room. "Your mother has requested you down to her parlor, Miss Charlotte."

"Charlotte, dear, come and sit," her mother said as Charlotte peeked her head in the parlor not five minutes later.

Charlotte stepped into the room, and stopped abruptly when she found that her mother was not alone. It was not often that they hosted guests. Their house was modest and callers were likely to notice the obvious limited number of servants. Generally, she and her mother, and now Frannie, made visits themselves, rather than entertaining at home.

But today, three other women sat at the edge of their seats, teacups perfectly balanced on their knees, and all looking at her as she entered. She immediately spotted the chips and scratches in each of the teacups. It went without saying the women would have noticed them too. Especially since each of them wore visiting gowns in the most recent fashions. The expensive fabrics made Charlotte's palms itch to feel the lush textures.

While she assumed her mother knew these women, she had never realized they were friends. The tall one in the middle was overly thin, her pale skin stretched across her frail frame giving her a hollowed, almost eerie appearance. Charlotte was not certain of her name. The two women flanking her were more familiar though. Lady Margaret Vesper on the right, her neck and hands dripping with jewels, and on the left, the formidable Dowager Duchess Roper.

Charlotte couldn't speak for the middle woman, but the other two were well-known gossips. The most disconcerting part of the scene though was that all three women were looking directly at her with their lips tightly pursed, while her mother's face was apple red.

"Sit down, Charlotte," her mother said tightly.

This was not a simple invitation to join them for tea. Something was wrong. Something dreadful. Her stomach rolled with a wave of trepidation.

"Is Frannie all right? Anthony?"

"Yes, dear. The family is all fine."

Charlotte kept her attention on her mother, and tried not to think about the disapproving looks from the other women. Their perceptions of her mattered not. People always thought

what they wanted regardless, never bothering to look very deeply to uncover the truth. Nausea whirled through her stomach and she pressed a hand to her flesh.

Her mother eyed the other ladies, who in turn, nodded at her to proceed. Her matriarch took a deep breath, then her shoulders sagged in defeat. “It appears that you have been compromised.”

Everything in the room seemed to stop, the noise, the movement, even Charlotte’s breath. Compromised? But how could that be? A riot of sensations cascaded through her body. Her palms sweat, her heartbeat sped, and her head pounded

“I don’t understand,” she ventured.

“The opera house,” Lady Vesper said. “Do not be daft, girl, you were caught.” Her curt tone sliced into Charlotte.

Oh God. She felt the blood drain from her face. Panic flooded her and she felt very much like a scared fox caught in the hunt.

Compromised.

With the Jack of Hearts!

She had been careful, hadn’t she? They had been alone in a darkened hallway while everyone else had been watching the opera. On her way back to her seat, she had seen no one. How was it possible that they had been seen?

“The Jack of Hearts, that vile thief,” the middle woman said, her voice deep and scratchy. “You were kissing that man.” Every consonant she spoke was enunciated perfectly.

Her mother looked at her. “Is what they say true?”

Charlotte eyed them all before she spoke. There was no delicate way she could answer without implicating herself.

Surely they could be persuaded to keep a secret. It was merely a kiss, her virtue was still intact.

“Yes, he did kiss me, but it was brief and chaste and nothing else happened,” she said. “My reputation should not be ruined.”

Lady Vesper’s nostrils flared. “There is nothing chaste about a kiss, girl.”

The middle woman leaned forward and set her cup and saucer on the table. “Harriet, your daughter is not merely ruined,” she said, deliberately averting her gaze from Charlotte. “Her reputation has been shredded. It will be a miracle if this does not also affect your youngest daughter.”

Charlotte’s head was pounding. No, not Frannie. This was ridiculous. It had just been a simple kiss. There was a list two-hands full in length of men who had stolen kisses from her over the years. Granted, not quite as sensual as those with Jack, but still. And none of the others had mattered. Or at the least, been witnessed.

“Not only that, but you, claiming your virtue remains intact.” Lady Vesper tsked her tongue and shook her head. “We have no proof of that.”

“We cannot be certain we are the only ones who saw anything that evening,” the middle woman continued. “Even if we were willing—which we are not—we cannot keep this a secret.”

The crisp “t” at the end of that word seemed to ring in Charlotte’s ears. She tried to ignore the sick feeling pooling through her body and the rapid rhythm of her heart, but she failed on both accounts.

“Is there nothing we can do?” her mother asked.

The Dowager leaned slightly forward. The woman's plump face softened and she gave a slight smile. "You can try to marry her off. Find some poor, unsuspecting man who is willing to take her, and get the license quickly before he can change his mind. It is the only way."

"You best hurry, girl," Lady Vesper said. "All those men you've turned down in the past, perhaps one of them is still willing to take you." She sat back with a condescending sneer. "Despite the fact that I'm told your dowry is virtually non-existent."

The woman's face said it all. You're welcome to try, but you won't find anyone to marry you once we're done with you. The silent threat hung in the air like a menacing and pending storm.

Tears pricked at Charlotte's eyes, but she forced herself to blink them away. She would not cry, not in front of these women. She refused to show them that kind of weakness. So Charlotte sat still and silent, concentrating on her breath. In and out. In and out. One breath at a time.

The women said nothing more, but continued their disapproving stares.

Her mother stood and folded her arms over her chest. It was the same stance she took when she went toe-to-toe with her children. Her mother always won. "I believe it is time for you to be going. I trust you can see yourselves out. I know you wouldn't want anyone to see you leaving our house, now that our reputation is so unforgivably tarnished. Come along, Charlotte," she said firmly.

She held her hand out to her daughter and together they left the room.

Behind them, she could hear the three matrons' chorus of "well, I never" and "they'll all be ruined." Charlotte wanted nothing more than to yell at them all. To tell them that simply because they had more money and a higher standing did not give them reason to come into her parent's home and speak so rudely.

But it was a confrontation she could not follow through on. It would only make matters worse, and as it were, she had quite likely done as they suggested and ruined the entire family. Hopefully Lord Blaire would not hold it against them and would still offer for Frannie's hand. And her poor brother, Anthony, who was schooling at Eton, would no doubt read about her in the gossip rags. Charlotte clenched her jaw, willing herself to not cry.

Her mother held tightly to her hand as she led her up the stairs and down the hall to Charlotte's bedroom. She did not stop moving and did not speak until they were in the room, with the door closed behind them.

Charlotte braced herself for a thorough tongue lashing, one that was probably long overdue and very much deserved, but instead her mother pulled her tightly to her chest and just held her. It took only a second before Charlotte dissolved into a puddle of regret and tears. There were so many things she wanted to say, so many things to apologize for, but no words came.

What was it about a mother's touch that could tear down one's defenses and open the floodgates so that the tears simply would not stop?

"I'm so sorry, Mama," Charlotte said as she pulled away.

Her mother shook her head. "Do not be sorry." She shrugged. "Perhaps it was not a great decision, but I don't

think it will cause as much harm as those three crones seem to think.”

Charlotte knew the truth though. She was ruined. Her mother might not want to face the truth, or perhaps she simply didn't want her daughter to realize the extent of her actions. But Charlotte's reputation would be in shreds. No doubt those three women had already stopped to tea with several other gossipers and the news was spreading rapidly.

“What shall we do?” she asked.

“We can pray that your father is having a good day and has some wisdom to share,” her mother said.

“I will have to retire to the country.”

“Don't be a goose, you will not. You will get married and you will be happy.” The last she said with such fervor, Charlotte almost believed her.

Ruined.

The word kept ringing in her ears. Shame spread through her. She wished she could simply disappear. Perhaps she could go to the Americas and have a fresh start.

“We will figure this all out, love, you wait and see,” her mother said. “Now you stay in your room until I check on your father and see how he is today. Yesterday was not a good day, but sometimes that means the following day is better.” Her mother gave her a fortified smile. Then she slipped out of the room.

Charlotte had heard her father's outburst the day before. She'd meant to go visit with him to see if her presence could calm him as it often did. But she'd lost track of time, then she'd gone and gotten herself compromised. Because she'd been foolish and impetuous. Perhaps she and Papa could retire

to the country together. Country doctors would not be as good as the ones here in London, but their funds for paying for his constant care were dwindling.

Perhaps someday a kind man would make an offer for her. Her mother was still lovely so it made sense that Charlotte's appearance wouldn't change too much over the years. She was clever, well-read, and fairly intelligent. Perhaps someday she'd find a man who wouldn't care that she had allowed a masked thief to steal a kiss. Or two.

Six



Edmond should not have been the least bit surprised when his sister entered his study the following afternoon. Normally, he rather enjoyed visits from his sister, rare though they were.

Today, was another matter entirely. He had slept poorly after last night's encounter with Charlotte. Despite relieving himself in the carriage on the ride home, despite his resolution to set aside Jack for good, find some acceptable young bride and finally be done with this ridiculous obsession he had with Charlotte, he spent most of the night tossing and turning, unable to rest.

He'd dragged himself out of bed at dawn, sure the day would improve. It had not.

The gossip about Charlotte hit early and hard. He'd locked himself in his library as soon as he'd heard the news.

Yes, he knew what he needed to do. Obviously.

This debacle was his fault. He would get her out of it, but he also knew that running straight to her side would serve no purpose other than to reveal to her, and probably to London as a whole exactly how pathetically obsessed with her he still was.

After all, as far as the world knew, she'd been compromised by the Jack of Hearts. The only way for Edmond to maintain any dignity at all was for him to wait at least a few hours before proposing to her.

So here he was, feigning concentration on the ledgers in front of him, waiting an appropriate amount of time before once again proposing to Charlotte Reed.

Willow settled into the wing-back chair opposite the desk. Several breaths passed, and then she cleared throat. "Edmond, you refuse to even look at me? Or acknowledge my presence?"

He should've known pretending to be consumed with business would not work with his determined sister. He forced himself to jot a few notes in the margins of the ledger, then closed the book with an exaggerated sigh.

"Willow, my dear sister. How lovely of you to pay me a visit. Can I assume there is something you wish to discuss with me?"

Her eyebrows arched over her shrewd eyes. "Indeed. I assume you've heard the gossip about Miss Reed? My *friend* Charlotte?"

"Indeed. It was unavoidable news at my club this morning. Not to mention, I heard two of my maids whispering about it while hanging the laundry. It's all anyone can discuss." He dared a look at his sister only to find her brown eyes staring at him with such...disappointment?

"She is ruined," Willow spat the last word, her mouth turning down at the corners. So perhaps not disappointment. Was that disgust?

But Edmond knew better than to think Willow would be put off by any of Charlotte's behavior, so she must be disgusted by society's judgment of Charlotte's behavior.

After a moment, she shifted her gaze back to his. "Will you do nothing?"

"I don't see that there is anything I can do? Does her family have a plan for handling this?"

Willow sat back in her chair, her brow furrowing in what was undoubtedly disgust. "I believe the plan is for her to go live in the country. But surely you can see how unacceptable a solution that is. Her sister will also be ruined, most likely. And I will lose, perhaps forever, one of my dearest friends."

A pang of guilt flashed through him, but there was naught to be done for it. If he came forward as the notorious thief, he'd be arrested. That hardly seemed a solution to Charlotte's reputation problem. "That is most regrettable. I am sorry this pains you, dear sister."

She nodded slowly. "And, there's nothing you plan to do about this?"

He sat back in his chair in surprise. "What would you have me do?"

"*You* could save her. *You* could propose marriage."

He snorted. "I sincerely doubt that Miss Reid would find my proposal a better alternative."

Did Willow truly think he hadn't considered that possibility himself? Did she really believe he hadn't been anguished over the idea of Charlotte's ruin since the moment he heard of it?

“I believe she could be persuaded to accept your proposal. And I believe it would be for the best.” Willow’s tone brooked no argument.

There was something his sister wasn’t telling him. Had something else happened with Charlotte? With yet another man? Rage simmered in his blood, but he kept it at bay. “So you think I should marry her? Willow, if Charlotte needs to be persuaded to marry someone—anyone—why should it be me?”

His sister’s eyes narrowed briefly, then she tilted her chin up ever so slightly. “Because I know that there was a time when you were once in love with her. Surely not all of those emotions you felt died off.”

That brought him to his feet. He walked to the window and stared out, then turned to face his sister. “I never claimed to be in love with Charlotte Reed.”

“You asked her to be your wife. You loved her.”

“I proposed to her. On impulse.” He shook his head. “That doesn’t mean I loved her. People get married in this town for a variety of reasons other than love every day. You know that.”

“She’s the only woman you ever proposed to. Do you think I’m a fool?”

What did Willow want him to say here? That he had loved her? Loved her so much he’d risked his fears and humiliation to court her and propose, before she’d spurned his advances? Did she want him to admit that Charlotte was the one woman who had made a fool of him? He would not do that. Not even for Willow.

He came back to his desk and returned to his seat. “Whatever I once felt for Miss Reed is irrelevant. A young

man's folly. Yes, I proposed. She rejected me. We've both moved on, and I suspect she doesn't even remember what happened. Half of London has proposed to her. You don't see all of them going to rescue her now do you?"

"Half of London isn't my brother. And she's my friend. That should matter if nothing else does."

"Your friends have an unnatural predilection for getting into trouble. I can't rescue all of them."

Willow stood, planting her hands on his desk, and leaning toward him. "So that's it? You're just going to let Charlotte's reputation be ruined?"

He stared at Willow.

She stared back.

The room felt overheated and uncomfortable. He tugged at the collar of his shirt, wondering if perhaps his cravat was too tight.

"Ruined by the Jack of Hearts. I mean, that's a tale to tell," Willow said.

"Unless he gets arrested, then that would truly ruin a lady's reputation," he countered. Did she know? Had his sister figured it out? He'd been so damned careful for so long.

Willow straightened, then propped her fists on her hips. One of her brows arched slowly.

So he continued. "Besides, I think we can both agree that a woman's reputation and life shouldn't be ruined simply because a man kissed her."

His sister blinked and exhaled slowly.

“How do you know he was the one who kissed her? Perhaps Charlotte was a willing participant in the kiss? She might have even instigated it.”

Willow rolled her eyes, and snapped, “I certainly hope she was willing. Because if she wasn’t a willing participant, then you are not the man I thought you are, brother, and I may be tempted to retaliate personally.”

His blood chilled as if he’d been doused in a vat a snow. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Willow marched around his desk, glared up at him for a moment, before reaching up and boxing his ears. “For a supposedly brilliant man, you’re incredibly stupid.”

He stumbled back a step. He rubbed the sides of his head. Willow was significantly smaller than him, but apparently quite strong. “You know?”

“Do I know that you were the Jack of Hearts?” Another eye roll. “Obviously.”

He fell into his desk chair. “How? When?”

She perched herself on top of his desk. “You are my brother. Of course I made the connection. Besides which, I am married to an incredibly handsome and clever inspector from the Scotland Yard.”

“What does James being handsome have to do with anything?”

“Nothing,” she said with a grin. “As for when, the truth is, I definitely should’ve figured it out earlier.”

Feeling beyond flummoxed, Edmond stammered, “I don’t understand. How did you make the connection?” He scrubbed

a hand over his face. “I thought I had hidden my identity quite well?”

“If you want to sit down over tea sometime so that I can praise how popular you are, and describe every nook, twist, and turn in my journey to discovering your identity, we can do that. But can we first please save the reputation and future of my dear friend, who would not be in this situation at all if it wasn’t for you.”

Edmond plunked his elbows on his desk and dropped his head into his hands. “Do you think I don’t want to save her reputation? I do. I’ve been torturing myself over how to save her since I heard the news. If I come forward and admit that I’m Jack, I’ll be arrested. That might be a sacrifice I’d be willing to make, if I thought it would do any good at all. But we both know it won’t. It would ruin her even more and cause shame to our family, and could potentially damage your husband’s career.”

“Don’t be dense, Edmond. You don’t need to confess to save her reputation. You need only marry her.”

“As I said before, even if I offer, there are no guarantees that she will accept my offer.”

“She will if you tell *her* you’re Jack.”

He shot to his feet. “Absolutely not.”

“Why not?”

“Willow, you must promise me you won’t tell her.”

His sister searched his face for a minute. “If you do end up married to her, you will have to tell her eventually. You cannot begin a life together with that kind of lie hanging over your heads.”

He merely nodded. “I will do what I feel is best. Besides, Charlotte would more than likely turn me down.”

Why didn't he want Charlotte to know the truth? It wasn't a question he dared delve into too deeply. He only knew he couldn't stand the knowledge that she had no affinity for him—Edmond—as he was. But when he'd put on that damned mask, she'd been attracted to him like a proverbial moth to a flame. And now they'd both been burned.



CHARLOTTE HAD ONCE AGAIN BEEN CALLED DOWN TO THE parlor. Her mother was heartbroken, her sister had stopped speaking to her, and her father had had a string of bad days, so much so that the doctor had kept him in a fog of laudanum. Which frankly made it all worse. Why wouldn't any of them yell at her, tell her how angry they were at her reckless behavior? It would have been easier to endure that than the quiet sadness and obvious disappointment that surrounded her.

Her steps slowed, as if walking to the executioner instead of her family's parlor. She entered, but instead of finding any of her family members, she saw someone else entirely.

“Edmond! What are you doing here?” Her hand went to her throat. Immediately she was aware of the worn furniture and the frayed edges of the carpets. What he must think of them. Oh, and she was currently wearing her oldest—albeit most comfortable—day gown, with its faded, calico fabric and too-short hemline. Embarrassment heated her cheeks. Meanwhile he looked the very picture of a handsome gentleman, dressed head-to-toe in black, except for the shock of white of his collar and shirt. She didn't give herself anytime

to pause and consider when she'd started thinking about Edmond in terms of handsomeness. There was not time for such frivolities.

“Your mother sent in some tea.” He pointed to the tray on the occasional table. “Would you like some?”

She shook her head. “I’m a terrible hostess. I should have extended that offer.”

He took a step towards her. “Willow told me.” His face revealed nothing, nor did his tone.

It was on her tongue to ask what Willow had told him, but there was no need. Evidently, there'd be no end to her humiliation. She ignored the heat in her cheeks.

It was one thing for him to read it in the papers in the privacy of his own home, but to come here and torment her. Why would Willow be so cruel? Tears pricked Charlotte's eyes, but she clenched her jaw and swallowed hard.

“So you have come to chastise me?” she said, her voice cracking. “Or perhaps mock me?”

He visibly swallowed. His frown deepened. “No, of course not.”

In one swift movement, he was standing right in front of her. Again, she noticed his golden eyes, and something reflecting back at her. Whether pity or concern, she could not be certain. It was always so difficult to tell with him. Like his sister, he was a pinnacle of propriety, but unlike Willow, he kept his opinions mostly to himself. He had never been much of a talker, at least he wasn't around her. She'd been privy to more than her fair share of his glowers and terse greetings.

“Charlotte, we don't know one another all that well,” he said, as if he'd sensed her concern. He swallowed, then took a

deep breath. “But you are a close friend of my sister’s and I hate to think of the gossips in town tearing you to shreds.”

She blinked rapidly and hoped he would not notice if any stray tears escaped. “Thank you for your concern,” she managed to say, but her voice sounded frail and weak. She glanced down at her worn slippers. Was this what her life was to be now? An endless parade of do-gooders coming by to bestow their pity upon her?

“Will you be my wife?”

Her head snapped up and she met his gaze. “I beg your pardon.”

He clasped her hand, his face set in steely determination. “Marry me, Charlotte.”

A wave of queasiness cut through her. She would much rather endure someone’s hatred than their pity. She wanted to ask him if his sister had put him up to this. If her dear friend had begged her brother to play the hero to save Charlotte’s reputation, but that the moment, she didn’t think she could swallow that truth.

He frowned. There was that glower she was so familiar with. His square jawline tensed.

She shook her head, willing herself not to crumble to the floor in a heap of tears. It didn’t make sense. “Then why? Why would you want me?” She stepped away from him and walked across the room. “I have no money and now my family’s good name has been tarnished. I have nothing to offer,” she said, motioning to the sparse room around them. “And I’m old.”

He shrugged. “I find myself in need of a wife.”

Leave it to Edmond to put this situation in such uncomplicated terms when everything in her life had seemed

to become entirely too complex. “As simple as that, then?” she asked.

This was a gift he was offering, whatever his motives. He was presenting her a way to not only save herself from a life alone on the outskirts of Society, but his offer would salvage some of her family’s reputation. But to accept wouldn’t be fair to Edmond. She admired his endeavor to save her, it was very kind. But it was too much of a sacrifice for him to make. Still, she found herself unable to ignore her curiosity.

She cocked her head slightly, letting him know she still waited for his answer. Evidently, he was grappling for a good reason, not that she could blame him. He pitied her and was altruistic enough to try to salvage her reputation.

“You are Willow’s good friend and I have known you for years. We are not strangers, that is always a good thing for marriage. I know you will be a good wife,” he said.

So cut and dry. She had to laugh. That was that. She wouldn’t be a good wife. At least she didn’t think so. “It’s doubtful I’ll be a good wife. I’m bossy and fussy and you’re so...” She grasped for a word. “Reticent.” She wanted to scream at him, force him to show some sort of emotion, but she knew that would get her nowhere.

Something flickered across his face—some emotion she did not recognize—but it was gone in a flash. “I will not beg you,” he said, his voice tight.

His words pinched at her already wounded pride. Why had he not mentioned his first proposal so many years before? When he’d once looked upon her with affection, and perhaps even lust in his eyes. Perhaps if he’d shown some measure of desire, she could have accepted, but knowing he only offered

for her out of some misguided sense of loyalty to his sister made Charlotte want to recoil.

“Begging is completely unnecessary. I can assure you that while I wholeheartedly appreciate your kind and generous offer, I’m afraid I can’t accept. It wouldn’t be fair for you to bear the weight of my impulsiveness. I plan to retire to the countryside where my reputation will no longer be fodder for someone’s afternoon tea.”

He stood, staring at her a moment longer, then he turned on his heel and left the room without another word.

Seven



Charlotte tiptoed down the stairs. Edmond's proposal and the expression on his face before he left played over and over in her mind, making sleep impossible. The last few days had upended her life in the most unpleasant ways. It would seem guilt was her new bedmate. She would either feel guilt for not marrying Edmond, and thus ruining her family, or she could feel guilt for marrying Edmond to save herself when he had done nothing wrong. All of which was precisely why she wasn't sleeping, and instead was sneaking to the kitchen for a late-night treat.

The kitchen's wooden floor chilled her bare feet, and her nightgown offered little in the way of warmth. She knew the cook kept her favorite lemon cakes hidden in a piece of covered pottery. Sure enough, as she opened the lid on the painted ceramic container, the tart, citrus scent filled her nose. She inhaled deeply as she reached in and grabbed one of the small pastries.

Gently replacing the lid, she bit into the tiny cake and allowed the tart sweetness to melt on her tongue. She closed her eyes; this was precisely what she needed to forget, momentarily, how everything had gone wrong. Not to mention the fact that she'd had not one, but two encounters with the Jack of Hearts and she still did not know his identity. Not that

any of that mattered now. She'd have to quit the Ladies' Amateur Sleuth Society when she moved to the country.

She made her way through the kitchen, into the darkened hallway, then stopped when she heard something coming from inside her father's study. The door was pulled closed, but had not latched. While she couldn't see anything, she could distinctly hear...her mother crying.

Charlotte squeezed her eyes shut, took a sobering breath and opened the study door.

Her mother looked up, swiping at her eyes guiltily as Charlotte crossed the threshold. "What are you doing up so late, my dear?"

"Couldn't sleep. Mama. Went and pilfered one of cook's lemon cakes." She offered her mother a weak smile.

Her mother stood and walked around the desk, to a worn settee. "Come, sit with me for a minute. We have something to discuss. I was going to wait until morning, but since you're awake, now works just as well."

"I've made a mess of things, haven't I?"

She sighed and patted Charlotte's thigh. "Oh, my darling. We all make a mess of things sometimes. I heard you had a visit from Edmond, Willow's brother earlier today."

Charlotte nodded. "I did. And I turned him down. I did not want him to bear the weight of my impetuosity."

Her mother cupped her cheeks. "Oh my darling girl, perhaps this sordid rumor is what prompted his proposal, but marriages have been built on far less. You've known each other for years. You know his sister and his family, as he knows yours."

“He doesn’t know everything.”

“Nor do you. Willow’s family has guarded their own secrets where her mother is concerned. She is a few years older than me, but I remember her.

Charlotte recalled Willow mentioning some illness her mother had, and that she’d retired from Society all together.

“Charlotte, look at me,” her mother said gently.

There was no point in trying to hide her tears, so she just looked up at her mother.

“I know why you’ve said no to proposals over the years, and trust me when I say your heart was in the right place. You are beautiful soul and your father and I love you so. But there is nothing you can do for him anymore. The doctors say that while there’s no way for them to know when his end will come, his health keeps weakening, in addition to his senility. And we need to be prepared. My beautiful girl, you cannot stay here in this falling-down townhouse, waiting for your father to die.”

Charlotte’s tears fell in earnest now. “You shouldn’t have to endure it alone, Mama, and in the past, I’ve been able to soothe him.”

“All true. And unless you’re planning to marry someone in a traveling circus, I do believe you can still visit. Swallow your pride and go to Edmond. See if his offer still stands.”

“Mama, please.”

“Charlotte, no.” Her mother shook her head, her voice stronger now. “Now is the not the time to altruistic or misguided. That man offered you salvation. The appropriate thing to do is take it. He is a good man. A kind man. And dare I say, handsome. Perhaps it is not a love match as your friends

have made, but it does not mean that it could not grow into such a thing.”

“What if he rejects me?”

Her mother exhaled slowly. “Then we will deal with that if we must. But you cannot keep throwing away your future, especially now that your sister’s future is at stake too. Edmond will treat you right. Go to him.”

“Now?” Charlotte asked.

Her mother’s head tilted. “I don’t believe we have a moment to waste. If he is not home, then you return straight away. Go and change into something more appropriate, and I’ll get a carriage ready.”

Charlotte did as her mother instructed, doing her best to ignore the pounding of her heart. He could very well tell her no, and send her away with a slam of the door. That was a risk. But she couldn’t help wondering if the greater risk was Edmond’s increasing appeal, and the fact that she could easily love him, though she doubted very much if he could ever love her.



“THERE IS A LADY HERE TO SEE YOU,” HIS HOUSEKEEPER SAID from the door of his study.

Edmond looked up from his ledger book and peered over his spectacles to see Mrs. Jones better. His glasses made the tedious work of numbers easier, but for not seeing a across a room. “A lady?” He then glanced at the mantle clock, noting it was well past midnight. “At this hour?”

“Yes, sir. A Miss Charlotte Reed.”

He inwardly cursed his heart that sped at the mere mention of her name. Why would she be here?

“Very well, send her in. And a tea tray to follow, please, Mrs. Jones.”

“Of course.” She bobbed, then left the room, only to return shortly, with Charlotte in tow.

The woman in question stepped into his study, her eyes going wide at the room and all the books lining the walls. She bit down on her lip and stepped in farther.

He didn’t bother rising from behind his desk. It was rude, ungentlemanly, he knew that. But they were beyond formalities, he and Charlotte. Two rejected proposals had to be some kind of record in London. Perhaps he could win a wager on that, make some extra money at the expense of his own folly.

“Charlotte,” he said, giving her a nod. He motioned to the chairs in front of him. She moved forward and lowered herself, but perched as if primed to jump to her feet a moment’s notice.

“Thank you for seeing me.” She smiled at him. “I didn’t realize you wore spectacles, like Willow.”

He pulled the metal frames off his face and set them on the desk. “I suppose our poor eyesight for reading small print is a family trait.”

She exhaled slowly.

“What do you want, Charlotte? It is rather late for a woman to be visiting a bachelor in his private residence, even if she is already ruined.”

She looked away from him, and he could have sworn he saw tears in her eyes. His gut tightened at the thought of her in pain, but when she turned back to face him, her eyes were clear.

She exhaled slowly, as if preparing herself for something unpleasant. “I wanted to revisit our conversation from earlier today. I was hasty and foolish in my answer.” She bit down on her lip again. “I didn’t want you to have to clean up after my mistake.” She met his gaze, her beautiful blue eyes unwaveringly locked with his own. “You shouldn’t have to do that, Edmond. You’re an honorable man, a good man, and I only wanted to save you from my mess.” She looked down at her hands, twisted them in her lap. This time when she glanced up, her tears were evident. “I’m sorry, Edmond. I should have said yes.” She sat straighter, steeling herself. “If you’ll still have me, I would be honored to be your wife.”

God, he wanted to say no. Wanted to reject her in kind, the way she’d done to him. Twice now. But the truth was, this problem she had was still his doing, still his responsibility. He’d ruined her, it was his duty to marry her, to salvage what he could of her reputation. Even if she didn’t know that. Even if she believed she’d been trying to save him from her mistake. It was all him. He could tell her that now. Tell her everything.

But she was already crying. Damned if he couldn’t handle a woman in tears.

“Please marry me.” She sat forward even more, and he was surprised she didn’t fall to the floor.

“What changed?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Between you saying no this afternoon and you deciding to come over here tonight. What is different?”

She eyed him carefully, a myriad of emotions flitting through her pretty eyes, hinting at depths he could only imagine. “My mother talked sense into me. I feared saddling you with my plight. And frankly I believed you indifferent to me, but the truth is, if you’ll have me, it doesn’t even matter. None of those things matter.

“The family’s coffers go to other expenses. I have no dowry to offer you. Evidently my poor excuse for a dowry had already been transferred to Frannie’s. I’m not sure what that even gives Frannie, since I don’t believe my amount was anything significant. With my name in tatters, she will be ruined by association, and without a solid dowry, no man will care how beautiful and accomplished she is.”

“That is true.” She believed him indifferent to her? That was nearly laughable. But tonight was not the time to discuss that. He wanted to ask more. What had happened to their money? Poor investments? He knew they weren’t spending any funds on frivolous things such as clothing and hair ribbons. Charlotte and Frannie did an admirable job of working with the gowns they had, keeping them mended and whatnot to make them look new and fashionable. So who was spending the family fortune?

She released a watery laugh. “I know that doesn’t really sweeten the pot, as it were. I don’t have anything to offer. But I will promise you, though my reputation might be tarnished, my virtue remains intact. You need not worry about anything of that sort.” She leaned forward and placed her hands on his desk. “I would endeavor to be a good wife for you, Edmond.”

“Despite being bossy and fussy, as you put it?”

A ghost of a smile played at her lips. “Yes. I do know all there is to know about running a household. I’m not particularly accomplished at playing music or drawing, but I am quite useful with a needle and thread.”

“Stop.” He held up a hand to cease her speech. “I don’t need you to sell me on yourself, Charlotte. I wouldn’t have offered to marry you unless I believed you capable of being a good wife. And I don’t give a damn about your skills, musical or otherwise.” He forked a hand through his hair. He shouldn’t be an arse about this. This was his mess to clean up. Still he couldn’t *not* mention her rejections. “You should see things from my perspective though. I’ve offered for you, asked you to be my wife, twice now, and you’ve turned me down both times. That doesn’t really illicit a sense of generosity in me.”

She winced slightly, then nodded, and she stood. “I understand.”

He came to his feet. “I’ll go see the Bishop first thing and secure a special license. We’ll marry in two days. I will send a carriage over to gather your belongings tomorrow, whatever it is you wish to move with you. And I’ll send a note over with all the details of where the ceremony shall be held.” He met her gaze, and held out a stack of bank notes he’d withdrawn from one of his desk drawers. “This should cover any gown costs you’ll need. But if more is required, just let me know.”

She opened and closed her mouth several times, looking very much like a fish. “You’ll marry me?” she finally asked.

He grabbed her hand and stuffed the funds into her palm. “Yes, Charlotte, I’ll marry you.” Then he turned and left the room.

They wouldn’t have to have a traditional marriage. They could marry quietly, perhaps even persuade people to believe

they'd already been engaged. They'd known each other long enough that it could be believable. Then he'd take her. He'd consummate their marriage and sate his lust for her, once and for all. After that, they'd have a traditional English marriage. One where they were polite and civil, and discussed nothing more than menus and draperies.

Eight



Charlotte stared at the mirror above her dressing table, but failed to see her own reflection. Behind her, the room was a flurry of activity. It wasn't every day that she got married. After all the weddings of her friends over the last year, today was her day, today *she* was the bride.

It was totally unnecessary that all of them be here, but here they all were. Her mother, Frannie, Amelia, Meg, and Willow. They bustled about, getting last minute details in order. Directly behind Charlotte, her maid, Anne, made the final arrangements of a very complicated coiffure. How she would get all the pins out this evening was beyond her.

“Charlotte, are you finished?” Amelia asked as Anne put the last pin in place.

Charlotte rose and turned to face her friends. “I believe so.”

Her mother came and stood before her, grabbed both of her hands. “You look exquisite.” She leaned up and kissed Charlotte's cheek.

“Thank you. Might I have a few moments alone with my friends?” Charlotte asked.

“Certainly,” her mother said.

“The carriages should all be outside waiting,” Meg said.

“Thank you, Meg, for your generosity,” her mother said, then she and Frannie stepped out of the room.

“Are you nervous?” Amelia asked.

“No,” Charlotte said immediately, but the word still felt like a lie. “Why should I be nervous? It’s Edmond.” Her apprehensive laugh probably betrayed her words. The fact was, she was beyond jittery. She was about to marry a man she did not love, and whom did not love her. It was certainly not the first marriage of the sort, and would not be the last.

“I never would have thought to put you two together,” Meg said. “But the more I think of you as a couple, the more it makes sense. As if the two of you were inevitable.”

Charlotte offered her friend a weak smile. It was kind of Meg to try to lift her spirits and add some romance to the day. Everyone danced around the truth of the matter. That she was a ruined woman, and Edmond was a selfless man who’d offered to save her.

That he had stepped in to save the poor, ruined Charlotte. The words went unsaid, but everyone knew who the hero for today was. She might be the bride, it might be her day in that regard, but Edmond was the one who deserved the credit and the attention.

“He said he needed a wife,” Charlotte said, unsure if the explanation would matter. She conveniently left out the part where she’d initially declined his proposal, then had to swallow her pride and beg him to marry her regardless.

“And who better than one of my best friends?” Willow said, then pulled Charlotte towards her in a gentle squeeze. “We shall be sisters. I always wanted a sister.”

The rest of the girls joined them.

“I know you’ll be as happy as Colin and I are,” Amelia said.

“Just give it some time,” Meg said.

“Oh, stop it. All of you,” Charlotte said. “You’re saying all the right things, but not one of you are smiling. What is the matter? This is my wedding, not a funeral.” She stared at each of their faces. “You are all worried, then?” she asked. “You believe I’m making a mistake, that I’ll never be happy?”

“Were you not worried about me when it looked as though Colin would never come to his senses?” Amelia asked. “Or when Meg herself was compromised, and chose to out herself to protect Gareth? And what about Willow who nearly missed her perfect match because of her stubborn nature?”

“She’s right, we are not worried you won’t be happy, we’re simply concerned about how *you’re* feeling right now,” Willow said.

“Right now, I feel as if we’re going to be late if we don’t leave soon,” Charlotte said. She smiled brightly, hoping they would believe her.

“Then let us get you married,” Amelia said.

“Any last-minute advice from all you seasoned wives?” Charlotte asked.

“Allow him to take his time tonight,” Meg said with a wicked twinkle in her eyes.

“Honestly, Meg, he’s my brother,” Willow said with a shudder, then stepped out of the bedroom.

Tonight.

Her wedding night.

When Edmond would come to her bed and claim her as his own. She'd been so preoccupied with the details of the ceremony and packing her belongings, she'd not once stopped to consider that Edmond would be putting his hands on her body. Charlotte hadn't given that aspect much thought at all. She followed the rest of them out of her bedroom and down the stairs to her waiting family. As they climbed into the carriages, her mind tried to find all the things about your wedding night that her mother had told her so many years ago.

She was not completely naïve when it came to matters of the flesh. She'd felt desire and she'd been kissed. Perhaps tonight would not be much different. It was hard to imagine stoic, unflappable Edmond swept away with desire.

Before she knew it, Charlotte and Edmond were standing in front of the registrar, holding hands. The few friends and family in attendance had crowded into the small office, and stood bunched together. A few sniffles escaped, and Charlotte knew her mother was crying. Whether they be tears of joy or sadness, she was unsure. And in the end, it didn't truly matter. She'd made a colossal mistake, and unfortunately, the people closest to her and Edmond would pay the price.

She listened as Edmond promised to cherish and protect her. Then, she herself made vows to love and care for him. Finally, the registrar made a legal decree and a final announcement.

“You may kiss your bride,” the registrar said.

Edmond cradled her face and pressed his lips to hers. It was a whisper of a kiss, but so gentle, sweet, and unexpectedly romantic that tears sprang to her eyes. When he stepped away from her, he met her eyes briefly and gave her a slight nod, as

if to say it would all be all right. Oh, how she longed to believe him.



EDMOND STOOD IN HIS STUDY, SWIRLING A GLASS OF BRANDY. His blushing bride was waiting for him upstairs. He'd hired a maid for her, and at the moment, she should be preparing Charlotte for her wedding night. *Their* wedding night. Just the mere thought of touching her had his cock thickening against his thigh.

He'd taken it upon himself to purchase her a few new items, including a nightgown for tonight. He swigged the amber-colored liquid. She would be upstairs, in his bedchamber, wearing nothing but that sheer nightgown, waiting for him to come to her. Waiting for him to make her his wife.

Yet here he was, downstairs.

Because the truth was, he was angry. With her and with himself. Had he been able to keep his hands—and lips—off of her to begin with, they wouldn't be in this predicament. But she'd rejected his proposals. Twice. She did not want him. She'd only married him because her mother had talked some sense into her.

Had he not been the reason for her fall from society, he would have walked away from her when she'd begged him to reconsider his offer. He could still reject her though. Give her a taste of what she'd done to men for years. Was it petty of him? Perhaps.

But he also had to prove to himself that he could withstand temptation. Not be so bloody weak. He did the right thing, he married her. He salvaged her reputation and given her protection.

He'd been taking himself in hand for years with her image in his mind. He'd do so again tonight because he refused to give her any kind of power over him.

Nine



Charlotte awoke, and the memories of the night before came rushing back. Her new maid had prepared her for the wedding night. She'd donned a gown that she'd been told had been specifically selected by her husband. It fit her perfectly, though the sheer fabric did very little to cover her intimate areas.

But he'd never come to her. She'd eventually fallen asleep, her body angled across her bed, tears dried in streaks down her cheeks. Oh, how the mighty had fallen. Pursued for her "incomparable beauty" as men had commonly said for years, then finally married to the one man immune to her physical charms.

It would do her no good to wallow in her misfortune, as it were. Edmond was not old or cruel. He would take good care of her, and perhaps he would visit her bed on special occasions. His birthday, perhaps. She sat up, intending to ring for her maid, but paused to listen at the noises she heard outside her door.

There was a ruckus at the door, then it burst open, and she saw nothing but fur. Two giant, hairy creatures bounded onto the bed and Edmond just laughed. That deep baritone voice mixed with humor did funny things to her insides. She stared

at him, uncertain if she'd ever seen him smile so wide, or laugh so deep. Or laugh at all.

“Begging your pardon, Mistress Charlotte, I tried to keep them out, but they're very insistent,” the servant said.

“It's alright, Porter. I've got it from here,” Edmond said, entering her room.

The older man suppressed a grin, bowed, then backed out of the room.

Charlotte stared at the barefoot, shirtless man standing in her bedchamber. She would never have guessed that unassuming Edmond would be hiding an athletic physique beneath his clothes. But that's precisely what he had. Though she could only see his torso, as his legs were covered in trousers, his chest, arms, and stomach were a miracle to look upon.

She simply did not know where to look first. His rounded, broad shoulders or the defined musculature of his arms. Perhaps the wide expanse of skin, several shades darker than her own, with flat, copper-colored discs on his pectorals. Then everything tapered into a narrowed waist with a V-like indentation in his skin, pointing downward to beneath his pants.

The light-brown hair scattered across his skin arched into a thin line between those perfectly sculpted abdominal muscles.

“You look like a statue,” she blurted, which was simply splendid. She winced wishing she could take back what she'd just said. It was asinine to compliment the man who abandoned her on her wedding night. She tore her attention away from him when the dogs jumped back onto the bed, and plopped their bodies around her.

“Charlotte, this is Rufus.” Edmond nodded towards the bigger of the two dogs as he rubbed the beast’s belly. “And this,” he indicated the slightly smaller, but no less enormous canine. “Cleopatra, Cleo for short.”

Charlotte tried not to be too distracted by the play of muscles in Edmond’s chest and abdomen as he patted the animals. Though she couldn’t help but be grateful that he hadn’t commented on her lustful staring at his body.

“You have dogs,” Charlotte said dumbly.

“Yes,” his voice stiffened with caution. “Do you not like dogs?”

Cleo was currently staring Charlotte down with her soulful, brown eyes. Charlotte pulled her gaze away to look at Edmond. “I don’t actually know. I’ve never had any pets.” She glanced back at Cleo, who had seated herself directly in front of Charlotte. “Why is she staring at me?”

“It’s one of two things. Either she’s mad because you’re on the side of the bed she prefers, or she wants you to pet her.”

Charlotte turned to face Edmond, alarm shot through her. “Those are very different things.”

He gave her an easy grin while he used both hands to rub Rufus. The dog’s tongue lolled out of its mouth in a blissful expression.

“What if she bites me?” she asked.

“Cleo doesn’t bite. Nancy did though, which is why she now lives in the country.”

“Nancy?”

“Nancy is a goose I rescued and nursed back to health. She got very attached to me. Anytime one of the female servants

came near me, Nancy would flap her wings and chase them, nipping at their feet and honking her displeasure.”

Charlotte laughed, then covered her mouth.

“It got so bad that Mrs. Jones said either the goose went, or she did.” He grinned at her.

Charlotte was so mesmerized by his smile. He just lounged on her bed, shirtless and roguishly handsome while lazily running his hand over Rufus’s fur.

He nodded towards the dog. “See, she just wants your love.”

Charlotte tentatively reached out and put her hand on the dog’s fur. She smiled widely. “She’s so soft. I thought her fur would be rough or wiry.”

He chuckled. “I think it’s because the cook sneaks them fish. The oil makes their fur silky.”

“I didn’t realize you liked animals so much.”

“They’re less complicated than people. They can’t lie or pretend. They just are who they are, and dogs love unconditionally.”

“Are these all the pets you have now?” Charlotte did her best to concentrate on petting Cleo and keeping her eyes off of Edmond’s bare skin, lest she reach over and start petting *him*.

“No. I have three cats too, but they mostly stay downstairs. Easy access to the gardens and plates of milk from the kitchen. They like to sleep on the window sills in my study.”

“I’ve always thought I would like cats, but the only one I’ve ever met is Amelia’s. Well, he was Colin’s, but now he belongs to both of them, I guess. He’s a bit surly though.”

Edmond nodded. “Sounds accurate. Cats are more selective with their affection than dogs are. And now you can claim my pets as yours. You are my wife.”

His words warmed her.

“Do you have plans today?” he asked.

She did have plans, but she didn’t know if she should voice them to him. He would, no doubt, find her utterly silly for thinking she could unveil the Jack of Hearts. But Edmond was her husband now, and she should be truthful with him. They shouldn’t start their marriage with any lies between them.

She propped herself up on an elbow. “I do. You may jest if you like, but I am investigating a mystery, and today I have plans to gather my information together.”

“A mystery?” he asked.

“Yes. Surely Willow has told you about the Ladies’ Amateur Sleuth Society.”

He nodded.

“Yes, well, we have been after the Jack of Hearts since *the Times* first posted about him. Needless to say, we’ve never come close to uncovering his identity. Although, obviously I’ve been close to him.” She felt the blush heat her cheeks.

“And you want to be the one to solve the case,” he said, his tone revealing nothing.

“I believe I have the most at stake in this investigation. He compromised me. Sought me out.”

His eyes dropped to the front of her gown and she was reminded of what she wore. The nightgown he’d selected for her for last night. So sheer that now while her nipples beaded

to stiff points, he'd be able to determine the precise shade of her skin. He swallowed hard and stood from the bed.

Desire, hot and thick, pulsed through her body and pooled between her thighs. How could she still want him after he'd proven he did not want her?

“What will you do when you catch him, Charlotte?” he asked.

She pulled the sheet up and held it tightly to her chest. “I hadn't thought about it beyond identifying him.”

“I'm only speculating, but if he's heard about the compromise, and our wedding, then I'd wager he wouldn't seek you out again. In fact, he might steer clear of you all together.”

“So you don't believe I can find him,” she said.

He shrugged. “I suppose you will find him should he want to be found.” He smacked his thigh and both dogs hopped off the bed, to wag their furry tails at his feet.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“Out. Your things should be delivered to your bedchamber sometime today.”

With that, he strode out of the room. She sighed and crawled out of bed. She would not spend the day feeling sorry for herself and crying in bed. Her life could have been patently worse. She could have been sent to live in the country alone, without her friends. Deciding on a warm bath before she began her day, she rang for her new maid. So far, she was feeling rather conflicted about being a wife.

Ten



It was their first outing as a married couple, a poetry reading held in Lord Asterville's glorious parlor. Everyone in the medium-sized crowd had already taken their seats, waiting for the performance to begin. Edmond sat stiffly to her right wearing a sharp black jacket that molded nicely to what she now knew were perfectly sculpted broad shoulders.

It had been nearly a week since their wedding and, more importantly, their wedding night. Still, he had not touched her. He had not come to her bed. He had not so much as given her a kiss on the cheek to bid her good morrow or good night. In fact, she'd seen very little of him. He left in the morning and did not often return until dinner. Although he was gone most of the day, he did take the evening meal with her, and spoke with her about her day. He was perfectly polite during those conversations. One might even say he was congenial.

Already it seemed they had settled into a most interesting schedule. She wanted to ask one of her friends about this, but didn't dare. They, unlike her, were in marriages full of love and passion. She did not want to admit to them that Edmond hadn't even consummated their union.

Lord Asterville was a known patron to the arts, and had a fondness for the gentleness and romanticism of the poets. The

presenter, a tall, thin man with fair coloring and pale eyes took his place in front of the seated crowd. He bent in a deep bow, then stood and began reciting the poem.

Charlotte tried to disguise her yawn beneath her gloved hand. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Edmond smile. She straightened in her seat and examined the room to see if she couldn't make herself more alert.

Asterville's townhome was known throughout London for being quite grand and opulent. She'd heard his country estate was astounding, but he rarely held events there. The ceiling's molding was gilded, with real gold, no doubt, and a fresco of cupids carried vines and flowers about. The panels on the walls were covered in deep-blue wallpaper. She yawned again. Well, detailing the room was certainly not keeping her awake.

The French double doors burst open, and several ladies gasped.

"Good evening." The Jack of Hearts stepped into the room and waved a pistol about.

Edmond tensed beside her and reached over to put his hand over hers.

"Sorry to interrupt such a festive event. If you would but bear with me, I'll be out and you can resume your," Jack paused and eyed the performer, "what is it that you're doing?"

The poet balked and swallowed visible. "Reciting poetry," he said in a much softer voice than he'd been using this evening. "An original."

Jack's face pinched. "Poetry. That sounds about right. You there," he pointed to the gentleman sitting closest to the door. "Come here."

The man stood and walked towards Jack.

Jack motioned with the pistol for the man to move quicker. He handed the man an empty bag. “What’s your name?”

“Sir Percival Ogden,” the man said.

“Very well, *Sir*,” Jack emphasized the word as if it were poison on his tongue, “Ogden is going to come around with this bag. Kindly relieve yourself of any baubles. This will only take a moment.”

Sir Ogden started down the front row. Several of the people shifted anxiously in their seats. Charlotte knew why. She’d been in Jack’s presence before, but tonight he was different. More on edge, agitated. Perhaps he had imbibed before going out this evening.

Edmond moved in his seat as if he were about to stand. But from their position—in the middle of the rows—there was nothing he would be able to do.

“Do not think to do anything to save the evening,” Jack declared. “I am a rather good shot, I assure you.”

Edmond leaned closely to her ear. “Slip off your wedding ring and hand it to me,” he whispered.

His hot breath feathered across her skin. She did as he instructed and used the folds of her skirt to hide her actions. As she handed the ring to Edmond, she watched him skillfully tuck the ring away with no more than a slight movement of his hand.

“Do hurry,” Jack said. “I do have other parties to attend.” That, he seemed to find outrageously funny, because he released a hearty laugh.

As the bag passed to her, Charlotte took off her earrings and matching necklace. Both were paste so while it was inconvenient to part with them, it would not cost her any great

loss. The man next to her dropped in his pocket watch, then passed the bag along.

Edmond, she had noticed, had not put anything in the bag, but Charlotte knew for a fact that he not only had a watch in his vest pocket, but he also wore a thin gold band on his right pinkie finger.

The bag finished being passed and Sir Ogden walked back over to Jack.

“Thank you, *sir*, for your assistance,” Jack said. He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out something, then tossed it into the room. And with that, he turned, and ran out of the room.

Sir Ogden bent and retrieved the tossed item. “A playing card,” he said. “Jack of hearts.”

“That rogue,” one woman declared.

Lord Asterville was sputtering in the corner, evidently unable to believe his elite party had been intruded upon.

Edmond stood and held his hand out to her. “Let’s go,” he said firmly.

Which was fine for her. She was eager to mark down her observations. Something had been amiss though. Jack had not been himself, although he certainly had looked the same. The pistol had looked the same. Perhaps this is what her Jack had meant that night at the opera. About there being more than one masked thief.

Another puzzle to put together.

Meanwhile, her husband had been the very picture of calm through the entire ordeal. His competence and protectiveness were intoxicating. Though she truly did not need additional

reasons to find Edmond appealing. Evidently, he'd been hiding before her very eyes for years, a veritable god among men.



IF EDMOND HADN'T BEEN SO ANGRY, HE WOULD HAVE laughed. The moment he tried to rid his life of the Jack of Hearts, some counterfeit version appeared on the scene.

He reached into his pocket and retrieved Charlotte's ring. "Here," he said.

"I'm sorry?" she said.

"Your ring." He grabbed her hand and led it to his palm where he had her ring.

Her nails scrapped against his flesh as she picked it up. "Thank you. It is the only real piece of jewelry I own."

Perhaps that meant she treasured it to some degree. Pride welled within him. He'd been rather particular when he'd selected her ring, wanting something unique and as beautiful as she.

"Did he frighten you?" Edmond asked.

"No," she said, her voice lined with hesitation.

"What is it?" The carriage jostled, ramming her shoulder into his as they hit a hole in the street.

"I don't know," she said. "Something was different. Off somehow."

"With Jack?"

"Yes." She paused for a while before speaking again. "I've only spoken to him twice, and only once before that did he rob

a ball I was attending, so I certainly am not an expert. Although I'd wager that Jack was not himself tonight." She laughed nervously. "Perhaps he was inebriated."

Or perhaps he was a fraud. But he certainly couldn't tell Charlotte that. She'd want to know why he knew that. The good thing was, she didn't seem to be thinking along those lines. For the time being, she suspected there was only one Jack.

"Charlotte," he said.

"Yes." Her voice was breathless.

"I should like it if you would allow me to join your little investigation."

She shifted in her seat and he could see the shadow of her face, but could not decipher her expression. "My investigation? On the Jack of Hearts?"

"Yes."

"You wish to help me unmask him?"

He cursed himself for not waiting until they were home in a lit room where he could gauge her response, to see if she thought him an utter fool. "If I might."

"I suppose I could use the assistance."

"Very good." He inwardly sighed. It would have been more complicated had he been forced to do his own investigation without her knowing. This way he could protect her.

As Jack he'd gotten close to her. Very close. And it would be like her to approach this new thief on the pretense that they had been previously introduced. Edmond couldn't allow that to happen.

“You know, Jack told me something curious that last night I saw him. When he kissed me,” she said.

“Indeed?”

“He wanted to warn me that he wasn’t the only masked thief around town. Perhaps this man was the other. Though it does make you wonder how he knew.” She whipped her head around to look at me. “Do you suppose they have some sort of underground club or meeting for thieves and villains?” Then she laughed heartily. “No, that’s preposterous.”

She was right, the fraud had seemed agitated, nearly manic. On all of Edmond’s escapades, he’d carried a pistol to persuade people to comply and to ensure no one called for help before he could disappear. But he’d never loaded it. Never even carried ammunition with him. He wasn’t so certain the new Jack was that kind.

Eleven



The following morning, Charlotte found herself on the doorstep of the townhome that Amelia now shared with her husband, Colin. The butler gave her a curious glance as he led her into the visiting parlor. Nearly twenty minutes later, Amelia stepped into the room. She wore a dark dress, but her hair still hung in the braid she slept in.

“Charlotte, is everything all right?” She rushed over to her friend and sat next to her on the settee. “I apologize for waking you. I shouldn’t have come this early.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You wouldn’t have come unless you needed something. Now talk.”

Charlotte smiled. Amelia had always been the most direct of the four of them, the most free with her affection. “I need some advice.”

Amelia’s forehead wrinkled. “And you came to me? Willow is far better at that sort of thing than I am.”

“Not when it comes to seducing her brother,” Charlotte said before she could think of how to better craft her words.

Amelia’s eyes and mouth went round. “Oh, I suppose you’re right about that.” But her frown didn’t change. “Things are not good between you and Edmond?”

Charlotte exhaled slowly and willed herself not to cry, but tears gathered in her eyes nonetheless. She shook her head.

“What is the matter? Is it painful? Do he not make certain that you’re ready for him?”

Charlotte opened her mouth, then closed it. Then she blew out a breath. “May I speak frankly?”

“Of course.”

“My husband could be the greatest lover in all of London. Perhaps all of Britain. But I would not know...” She choked on the last word. This was beyond humiliating to admit.

“It’s all right, Charlotte,” Amelia cooed. “Whatever it is you have to say, all will be well.”

“I don’t know what kind of lover Edmond is, or if the act itself is painful, because he has not touched me.”

It was Amelia’s turn to open and close her mouth like a landed fish. “What about your wedding night? He did not consummate?”

So, Charlotte told her about that night. How her maid had come to ready her. The special nightgown, and then crying herself to sleep. She’d donned that damned gown every night since, hoping he’d seek her company.

She released a watery laugh, realizing then that her tears had started to fall in earnest. “Ironic, isn’t it? How men always vied for my attention and I managed to marry the one man who is indifferent to me.”

“Do you think, perhaps, that Edmond’s affections lie in a different direction?” Amelia asked.

Charlotte frowned. “I’m not sure I know what you’re implying.”

“He could prefer men.”

“Oh, I had not considered such a notion.” Then she remembered that morning in her bed with the dogs when he’d stared so boldly at her barely covered breasts. That had been desire in his gaze, hadn’t it been? She was nearly certain.

“I don’t think that’s it though,” Amelia said. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you. It is no different than the way a hungry dog looks at a bone.”

Charlotte leaned back against the settee and banged her head softly three times. “How do I fix this, Amelia? How do I seduce my husband? I know we might not ever have a love match, but I would like to be a mother, if nothing else.”

“When I seduced Colin, I simply went into his bedchamber and removed my dressing gown. Then I stood before him nude and told him I wanted to have an affair, that I wanted him to touch me.”

Charlotte sat abruptly. “When did you do this?”

“That’s not important. What matters is that it worked. There was no way he could deny me in that moment.” Then she smiled conspiratorially. “I’ve done it since then too. Just waited for him in our room, laid out on the bed without a stitch of clothes on. One time I went into his study while he was working.” She giggled. “Works every time.”

“So, I should just wait for him, in his bed?”

“Are you not sharing a room?”

Charlotte’s mouth opened, but no words came out.

“That’s all right. It’s not unusual. That is why most houses come with adjoining rooms, dear.”

“He hates me, Amelia. Why would he offer to marry me if I make him this miserable?”

“Oh, he doesn’t hate you. That would be impossible. You’re perfectly delightful. And you’re smart. And so loyal.”

“You didn’t mention anything about the way I look.”

“Well, you can’t do anything about that. You’re either pretty or you’re not. And in the long run, none of that matters. Edmond knows you’re pretty. He has eyes.”

“If that were true, then wouldn’t he want to have relations with me?”

“Men are peculiar.” Amelia reached over and patted Charlotte’s hand. “You can fix this. Trust me. Just try the seduction. If that doesn’t work, we’ll figure something else out.”

“What if my marriage is just loveless? What if he never cares about me, never wants me?”

“That isn’t going to happen. I feel certain about it.”

“I wish I had your confidence.”

Amelia glanced at the door. “There is one other thing you can try,” she said, her voice quieter.

Charlotte nodded. “Go on.”

“Put your mouth on him.” Amelia’s eyes dropped to look at Charlotte’s lap. “Lick and suck him there. He will go insane.”

“On his member?” Charlotte asked.

Amelia grinned broadly and nodded. “Oh, the noises I can cause him to make.”

“You are scandalous.”

“I know! Being married is such fun sometimes. And he can do that to you too.” Then she fanned herself.

“How did I never know any of this about you?” Charlotte asked.

“These discussions are best had between married ladies. He will not be able to resist you forever, Charlotte.”

Charlotte nodded and took a deep breath. She considered her friend’s advice the entire ride home, and for the remainder of the day. Before the evening meal, she took a sweet-scented bath, scrubbed her body, and then lathered herself with lanolin until she felt certain she was as appealing and soft as possible.

She’d donned a new gown for dinner, one that accented the blue of her eyes. Her hair had been pulled up in a simple but effective coif, drawing attention to her décolletage, bare shoulders, and neck. This was all the first part of her seduction plan. The second part depended entirely on how well dinner went.



EDMOND SET DOWN THE DECANTER AND PICKED UP THE GLASS. He swirled the amber-colored liquor around, watching the prism effect of the liquid. Charlotte had looked so damn beautiful tonight. That blue gown had perfectly matched her eyes, and against that pale perfect skin of hers, he’d been unable to take his eyes off of her. He’d wanted nothing more than to bend her over the table, pull up her skirts and plow into her until he forgot all about rejected proposals and stupid masked thieves.

So far, he wasn't having any difficulties appearing to be the smitten husband. It was easy to watch her. Easy to find her in any room. She was taller than most women. And that black, black hair of hers against her fair complexion was enough to drive any man to madness. Her figure was lush and curvy in the way a woman was meant to be. Her narrow waist led to a flared set of hips and rounded bottom, her breasts so perfectly ripe, he was damn near ready to write a poem about them.

He downed the liquid, then poured himself another. It was getting more and more difficult to stay away from her at night. The last three nights he'd stood at the door adjoining their suites and just listened to her breathe. He was pathetic. She was his wife. He had rights as her husband. She wouldn't even deny him, he knew that. Her body would blossom under his touch. He knew that much, and he was being stubborn by denying them both the pleasure.

It was the greatest irony that the man she fancied was in fact him, only a part of him he'd invented. What would she do if he told her? If he came into her bedchamber wearing that mask? He downed his glass and leaned back onto the settee, his arm draped over his eyes. Maybe he should have another drink. One after another, until he just passed out. Then he wouldn't have to think about what he *wasn't* doing to his wife upstairs.

A knock came at the door, then it opened. "Edmond, are you in here?" It was Charlotte, her voice soft and uncertain.

"Yes, I'm here."

The door closed and he could have sworn he heard it lock. But he didn't move. Maybe she'd come to hit him over the head with something. He likely deserved it.

"Are you feeling ill?" she asked, her voice closer now.

He moved his arm and opened his eyes. “Tired. That’s all.”

She bit down on her lip. Than infernal lip-bite that made him want to bend her over the desk and lose himself inside her.

“Do you need something?” he asked.

She said nothing, simply stood there, watching him. Then her hands went to the tie at her waist and she undid it, shrugged her shoulders and her dressing gown slid to the floor, leaving her in nothing but her glorious skin.

“Christ.” He smoothed a hand over his face. “What are you doing, Charlotte?”

“I should think it would obvious. We have not consummated our union, and I’m not certain if you were waiting for me to tell you I would accept you into my bed or not. But I wanted you to know that your advances would be welcome.” Her chin lifted ever so slightly. She was glorious. Standing there in her unblemished alabaster skin.

He hadn’t even let his eyes wander to take in the nuances of her curves. “We don’t exactly have a normal marriage,” he began. He fought the urge to roll his eyes at himself. “Things are complicated. I thought you’d want to settle into our relationship more.”

She frowned and her arms jerked as if she wanted to cover herself, but she didn’t. She just stood there, every perfect feature of her body on display for him.

So he let his eyes slowly eat up her frame. Her rounded, pert breasts with the pale-pink tips... The indentation of her waist that flared out in her curved hips... That sweet, sweet dimple of a navel in the gentle slope of her stomach... Those impossibly long legs that were exquisitely shaped and made

him wish she could wear trousers... The triangle of black curls nestled between her thighs that made his mouth water.

“I know you want me,” she said, her voice firm. “I can see the desire in your face.”

“Wanting you has never been the problem. You’re a beautiful woman, Charlotte, every man wants you.” She was right though. He wanted her. So much, it was driving him insane.

“But *you* are my husband. It is your duty to see to my needs. Perhaps you don’t realize that women have such needs. I was led to believe that men were insatiable in the bedroom, but you seem perfectly content to never touch me.” Her voice hitched on that last word, but she did not cry. She wouldn’t let herself, he knew that much. “Is it that you already have someone? A mistress you’re attached to?” She took a step back and nearly folded in on herself, as if that thought hadn’t even occurred to her until that moment.

“Come here.”

She frowned, but she walked towards him.

“I have no other woman. No mistress. As long as you are my wife, I will not. Come closer,” he said.

Again she moved, until finally she stood directly in front of him. He was eye level with her navel. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to him. His cheek pressed to the soft skin of her belly. She smelled of roses and lavender. The plump parts of her bottom rested on his forearm.

He kneaded her bottom while he placed tiny kisses along the soft skin of her stomach. His tongue dipped into her navel and he swirled it around.

Her fingers thread through his hair. “Edmond,” she whispered.

Edmond. Not Jack. She knew who was touching her.

He fell to his knees and buried his nose in the apex of her thighs. He breathed in deeply, letting himself close his eyes and inhale her rich, musky scent. How had he thought he could resist her?

She sucked in a breath and then made a strange squeaking noise, but she made no move to walk away.

“Open your legs, sweetheart.”

She did as he bade, and he slid his thumb through her folds, finding her hot, slick, and wet. The scent of her arousal was an aphrodisiac to his senses. He dove in, sucking her little pearl of nerves straight into his mouth.

“Oh God,” she breathed. Her nails raked across his scalp and he growled into her sensitive flesh

He opened her up more to him, put one of her legs over her shoulder and he gripped her other ankle to stabilize her. From here he could lick all of her. He tongued at her opening, tasting her, teasing her.

She continued to release a myriad of nonsensical noises and words, punctuated with the occasional “Edmond” tossed in. He’d never tire of hearing her breathe or moan his name. Her fingers tightened in his hair, and he quit teasing. He wanted to taste her climax on his tongue, wanted her essence all over his face.

He licked up her seam, until he reached that little nub, and he swirled his tongue around it in slow circles. With his free hand, he slid one finger into her heated channel. Again she

cried out some utterance of consonances. She rocked against his face and chanted “Yes, yes, yes.”

He curled that finger inside her to rub at the front of her inner walls, and he kept his rhythm. God, she tasted good. So sweet, so tangy, so damned perfect.

She moved as if she was trying to pull away, but he held her firm and a second later, she shattered. A fresh wave of wetness hit his tongue as she shook and quaked in his arms, all the while repeating his name over and over again.

When her climax subsided, he placed a single kiss above her mound, then rose to his feet. She met his gaze, her blue eyes darker with their blown pupils. She gave him a woozy smile.

“The next time you want me to see to your needs, let me know. Goodnight, Charlotte.” Then he turned and left the study.

He took the stairs to his bedchamber two at a time, and had barely closed the door before he ripped the front of his trousers open. His hand circled his hard, aching cock and he pulled up, twisting when he reached the tip. It wouldn’t take him long. He’d been on the damned edge just by having his mouth on her. He couldn’t lose himself inside her, not yet. Two more tugs and he released all over his cupped hand, whispering his wife’s name.



WHAT THE DEVIL HAD JUST HAPPENED?

Shame, hot and embarrassing crept over her, surging through her body and replacing the euphoria she'd just experienced. He'd taken that away from her. Made her feel cheap and discarded. As if she was nothing more than a two-pence whore.

She quickly draped her dressing gown back on her body and tied it closed. Tightly.

That was not a seduction. That had been something tossed to her out of obligation. Or duty. Why had he even offered to marry her if he so obviously disliked her? How was it possible that she, Charlotte Reed, who had acquired a ridiculous number of proposals, had ended up married to the one man in London immune to her physical beauty?

She hated the tears that fell. Hated the way her body had reacted to him. Hated everything about her life in that moment.

And ask him the next time she had needs? That would never happen. She'd never ask him for anything. Ever. Again.

Twelve



“We must get started immediately,” Amelia said as Meg finally took her seat.

Willow set the newspaper down.

“It would seem that our Jack interrupted Lord Asterville’s poetry reading two nights ago,” Amelia said.

Charlotte looked up with a gasp. “We were there. Edmond and I.” Why she felt the need to add that, she didn’t understand. Perhaps it was still a bit strange that she was married. “Jack arrived shortly after the performance began.” How had she neglected to tell Amelia this very thing when she was here yesterday? She’d sought out her friend to seek martial advice, and it hadn’t even occurred to her that she’d seen the notorious thief the night before. Was she so preoccupied with her marriage and Edmond’s lack of interest that the longstanding investigation of Jack’s identity had simply slipped her mind?

“It wasn’t a very large gathering, though, was it?” Meg asked. “Why would he bother with it?”

“Perhaps he was merely in the neighborhood,” Amelia suggested.

“I think it was the guest list,” Charlotte said. “I’m actually not certain how Edmond managed to secure an invitation, now that I think about it. It was a rather elite crowd. And not to imply that my husband isn’t deserving of such company, but there were two dukes in attendance, and three times as many earls. The jewels were plentiful.”

Willow pointed at Charlotte’s hand. “You managed to keep your wedding ring. Did you not wear it last night?”

Charlotte couldn’t help but smile. “No, I wore it, but Edmond took it from me and hid it so quickly, I didn’t even see where he put it. And I was sitting right next to him. He also refused to place anything in Jack’s bag.”

“That was rather brave of him,” Amelia said.

“Edmond has always been stubborn,” Willow pointed out. “I do believe that characteristic runs in our family.”

Stubborn. Charlotte hadn’t ever realized that about Edmond. But there was much she did not know about him. In fact, she barely knew him at all. They were acquaintances and nothing more. Perhaps now that he’d suggested they work together on the investigation, she would uncover more about the man she was married to.

“There is more,” Charlotte said, willing herself to focus on the task at hand. “Jack seemed agitated, unlike his usual charming self.”

“What do you make of that?” Meg asked.

“I’m not certain. Perhaps he had simply had a few drinks,” Charlotte suggested.

“Was anything else different, other than his behavior?” Willow asked.

Charlotte thought back, then shook her head. “I don’t believe so. He was dressed the same as every time I’ve seen him. He had the pistol with him, although he seemed, how shall I put this? More aggressive with it. More inclined to use it, perhaps.”

“Were you frightened?” Amelia asked.

“No.” And she hadn’t been. Edmond had clasped her hand and she’d felt safe, protected.

“Imbibing can certainly cause a man to become more violent,” Willow said. “James has new examples of this weekly, with his cases.”

“His voice might have sounded somewhat different too. But it’s hard to tell. My most recent encounters with him we’d been alone, and he’d spoken softly.” His voice had been lower, more intimate on those two other nights. At the poetry reading he’d nearly seemed excitable.

“Suppose he heard about your compromise,” Amelia said, directing her attention to Charlotte. “Could that not cause him to be angry? Perhaps more erratic than normal?”

Meg nodded. “He could be angry now because Charlotte has married someone else.”

“Well, that certainly sounds romantic,” Charlotte said. “But I hardly think this is a case of jealousy. His gaze did not land on mine even once the other night.”

“He could instead be angry that he’d almost been caught. That his secret had nearly been compromised along with your reputation,” Amelia said.

Charlotte signed. “Perhaps there were no differences. Perhaps it was I who was agitated and I blamed it on Jack.”

Willow tilted her head. “Don’t discount your instincts so quickly. You’ve had more interaction with him and you could be absolutely correct.”

“It would make sense, though, for her to be angry with him,” Amelia said.

“Most definitely,” Meg agreed. “He callously compromised her. The cad.”

Charlotte waved her hand about. “None of that matters now. My reputation was spared and it seems no permanent damage was done. Frannie is still being courted by Lord Blaine and—”

She had been about to add that she was safely married to a doting husband. But that was an outright lie, and she wasn’t even certain why the thought had entered her mind. Perhaps wishful thinking.

When had she started to long for Edmond to love her? If in fact that’s what she was feeling. Perhaps it was merely recognizing the differences between her union and that of her friends.

She cleared her throat and began again. “I am safely married to a generous man,” she finally said. “Who, by the way, has offered to assist me with my investigation.”

“Edmond is doing the noble thing,” Amelia said. “He’s protecting you.”

“She’s right. Jack knows who you are and could come after you,” Meg said.

“My brother will be an excellent assistant,” Willow said. “He’s always been rather clever.”

“And he’s always been good at gathering information,” Meg said. “He was instrumental in proving Gareth’s innocence.”

Willow chuckled. “I don’t know if it’s an affinity for gossip or what, but he’s always been privy to all sorts of information.”

“He listens,” Charlotte said. “When most people only talk, he listens.” She’d seen that in the few days living with him. She’d once assumed he was quiet simply because he had nothing to say, or because he found the company undeserving of his words, but she’d learned that neither were correct. He said little because he sat back and observed. Quietly took it all in, which made him more privy to details that most overlooked.

“I suppose he will be a most useful assistant,” Willow said with a wry chuckle.

And then it struck Charlotte that he had offered to assist her, yet he still did not actually spend time with her. How did he think to achieve the first without the latter? She knew her friends went on talking. They were all attending a ball tonight and the discussion had turned to that. But then it seemed as if they were no longer talking about dresses the way they used to—regarding fashion. No, now it appeared her friends used their ballgowns as a means to catch their husbands’ attention.

She wanted to ask why they’d need to do that. She’d been in the room multiple times with each couple, and all of their husbands only had eyes for them. It didn’t seem as if it would matter what they wore.

“After the last ball,” Meg said. “We barely made it to the carriage before Gareth had to have me.”

How did that even work, Charlotte wondered. What a fraud she was, and what a charade her life had become.

“What’s the matter, Charlotte?” Amelia asked, her voice soft and gentle.

Charlotte glanced up to see concern etched in each of her friends’ faces.

“You look so sad,” Willow said quietly.

Meg placed a hand on Charlotte’s arm. “Tell us. You know you can tell us anything.”

Charlotte exhaled slowly, closed her eyes. “It’s difficult hearing about your husbands. They all love you so much, you’ve found these amazing love matches, and sometimes it just gets to me.”

“What are you talking about?” Willow asked.

Charlotte turned to face her. “Only that my marriage isn’t like any of the rest of you. Mine was a true marriage of convenience. Edmond saved me and I’ll always be grateful.”

Willow leaned forward in her seat, her brow furrowed. “He saved you because he loves you. He’s been in love with you for years. Don’t pretend you don’t know that.”

Charlotte’s heart tightened with a shot of pain. If that had been true, once upon a time, it wasn’t anymore. Edmond had seen behind her curtain, as it were, and obviously hadn’t liked what he’d seen. “I don’t know what you think you know, but I live with the man. And I know that my husband does not love me.”

“How can you be so blind?” Willow asked.

“Willow,” Amelia hissed.

Charlotte held up a hand. “No, it’s all right,” she said to Amelia. “Tell me this then, Willow, if your bother loves me so much, why hasn’t he touched me since we got married? Why does he only give me one single dance when we go out? One.” She held up a single finger. “He doesn’t kiss me, doesn’t embrace me.” She released a tight and humorless laugh. “He can barely stand to be in the same room as me. So don’t try to tell me that I’m the one being insensitive.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Willow said.

“Perhaps Edmond fancied me when we were younger, but whatever he might have felt for me once is gone now.”

“Did my suggestions not help?” Amelia asked.

Charlotte shook her head. Then she stood, willing herself to not cry. At least not until she was in the carriage. “I need to go.” She moved as quickly as possible out of Amelia’s home. She didn’t want to hear their whispers. Or their concerns.

Because damned if that hadn’t been humiliating. Now they all knew her secret. But before she reached her carriage, Meg caught up with her.

“Charlotte, wait. I just wanted to say one thing.”

She looked down at the petite redhead.

“Tonight at the ball is the perfect opportunity to knock some sense into Edmond.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He’s being daft. So tonight, dance as many times as you want. Flirt with other men. Not too much, you don’t want to make him look bad. But enough to make him notice you. You want his eyes on you at all times. Perhaps remembering who

you are and the kind of competition there was for your hand might knock some sense into him.”

“It’s doubtful.”

“What do you have to lose?”

Thirteen



Edmond leaned against a column, watching his wife spin across the dance floor with Lord Benchly.

“You do know the two of you are the talk of the town,” his companion said. Drake Hamming, the Marquis of St. Grey, and Edmond had been friends since school. He had a rakish reputation, but was the only friend who’d stood by Edmond when his mother’s illness had gotten worse, and when the family’s finances had nearly depleted.

“You of all people should know that, as much as you love gossip,” Grey said.

Edmond quirked a smile. “It is not that I love gossip, I merely seem to absorb it and I pass it on when it suits me.”

Grey grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing footman. “Call it what you like,” he said with a shrug.

Truth be told, Edmond hadn’t heard the gossip. He’d intentionally been ignoring his usual haunts, merely to avoid such things. No doubt they talked about how scandalized Charlotte had been, and how he had ridden in to save the day. They would make him hero to her villain and he hadn’t wanted to hear it.

“What are people saying?” he asked. Grey would not judge him for his curiosity, nor anger, if Edmond told him he’d heard enough.

“For one, people seem amazed that someone finally persuaded Charlotte Reed to marry them. Despite the scandal, they seem most fascinated by that fact,” Grey said.

“That I persuaded her to marry me?” What choice had she had in the matter? “So there is not much talk about the compromise then?”

Grey downed his champagne, then made a face. “Wretched drink. There has been some. The kinder folks say that she couldn’t help what happened, that she was taken advantage of from that beastly thief,” he said, the last bit in a mock-feminine voice. “There are others, though, who have not been as forgiving.”

Edmond wanted to ask for names. But then, what would he do with them? Confront a poor aging woman and tell her to keep her tongue in her mouth?

“So how did you do it?” Grey asked.

“Do what?”

“Convince her to marry you.”

Evidently Edmond wasn’t the only one doubting his worth of his bride. Only no one else knew the full truth, well except his sister. “I simply asked and she accepted.”

Grey nodded. “She looks happy.” He nodded to Charlotte out on the ballroom floor.

She did look happy. Her smile was full and her eyes bright as she danced. Then, as if she could feel him watching her, she looked across the ballroom and met his gaze. Something

unsaid passed between them, something he'd wager neither of them understood. She nearly missed her next move, so she turned away from him, and once again faced her partner.

She might be happy, but Edmond knew he had nothing to do with that.

Three dances later, Charlotte had still not returned to his. Grey had left him to go in search of something stiffer to drink and Edmond stood alone, watching other men touch his wife.

He'd watched her dance plenty of times before. She always had a full dance card and no doubt had very sore feet by the time she crawled into her bed at night. He'd only asked for one dance tonight, the last waltz. In the meantime, she was taking advantage of his generosity to share her.

"Jealous?" Grey asked as he slid next to Edmond.

"Damn, don't you make a sound when you walk."

"Here." He handed Edmond a glass of amber liquid.

Edmond nodded his appreciation. "No, I am not jealous. It is I who she will go home with."

"And warm your bed," Grey filled in.

Edmond grunted a response.

Because she wasn't going to warm his bed. Because he was a stubborn fool.

"Did you find out anything more about the theft at Lord Asterville's?" Grey asked.

"Not yet, but I'm still looking into it."

"Why so curious? That bloke has been taking people's baubles since last year some time."

“Because he took something of Charlotte’s. It only seems right that I endeavor to get it back for her.”

“Have you asked at the pawn brokers? That’s where I’d start.”

Edmond nodded. “I suspected the man would walk into one and try to sell the whole lot, but none of the places I’ve checked have had anything like that.” Of course, when he’d had pieces to sell, he hadn’t handled it that way. He was merely speculating based on the man’s behavior the other night. His impatience.

“I’ll let you know if I hear anything,” Grey said.

“I appreciate it.”



CHARLOTTE’S EFFORTS TO MAKE HER HUSBAND JEALOUS HAD been half-hearted at best. In truth, all she’d done is try to dance as much as possible to forget how sad she was. Then she’d caught his eyes from the dance floor, and her cheeks still burned from his glance. He’d only asked for one dance himself, and she’d assumed that meant she was free to dance with whomever she chose for the others. Within reason, of course.

He sauntered up to her after she finished a dance with Lord Braden.

Holding his hand out to her, he said, “I believe this is my dance.”

She inclined her head and placed her hand on his, and he led her to the dance floor. His warm hand pressed lightly

against the small of her back, and he held her much closer than she was accustomed to with other dance partners. He was her husband though, he had the right. And if it caused talk, then so be it. Her name had already been sullied.

But the nearness of him, the scent of him—all earthiness and masculinity—reminded her of their encounter in his study. Two nights ago. He'd been so passionate, and he'd taken her body to such heights. He hadn't touched her since. She wouldn't request his "services" again, as he'd so crudely implied.

She peered up at him, nearly losing herself in those honey eyes of his. How had she never noticed his eyes? Such a unique color. She supposed it was because she'd so often seen him as part of her scenery, and simply hadn't bothered to look closer. There was much about Edmond she'd never noticed before.

But staring up at him now, noting that aquiline nose of his and the intensity of his eyes, the perfect squareness of his jawline, dusted with a shadow of whiskers. Her husband was positively dashing. Her heart sped, and had her hands not been otherwise occupied, she would have brought one to her breast to keep the fluttering from being too noticeable. Because surely people could see the pounding through her skin, through her gown.

He turned them expertly and she realized another thing she'd not known about Edmond—he was a skilled dancer. Good heavens, if she wasn't careful she would most assuredly fall desperately in love with a man who could barely tolerate her company.

Why wouldn't he visit her bed? Were other married couples that way, and her friends' unions were the exceptions?

Perhaps when she'd gone to him the other night, she should have spoken about meeting his needs rather than hers. Then she could have put her hands and mouth on him.

“Have you been enjoying yourself?” he asked.

She stared at his face, trying to determine if it was a simple question or one meant to cause her shame. “I have,” she answered honestly. “And you?”

“I've never cared much for these affairs.”

She eyed him for a moment. “Then why do you come?”

He gave her a wry grin. “It is what we do, is it not?” Then a tight shrug. “We dress up and parade ourselves about, trying to pretend that our lives are such that we can afford the best clothes and the sturdiest horses.”

She was quiet for several moments, considering his words. How often had she and Frannie sewn new lace upon an old dress to try to give it new life? “I suppose we do. We did not have to come, though. I'm content staying in for the evening if that is your preference. I am your wife now.”

“Yes, you are my wife and you enjoy these affairs. It is also good for your reputation, as it were, to be seen in public with me. We are a couple in love, after all.”

Edmond's words were subtle, but Charlotte didn't miss the bite of sarcasm. They were supposed to be in love, that was the story that had been told, but certainly everyone knew the truth. Surely by now, everyone had heard that she'd been caught in the embrace of a notorious thief, and gentlemanly, kind, and scholarly Edmond had swept in to save her. No doubt as a favor to his sister and her dear friend.

“Smile, Charlotte,” he said, his deep baritone brushed across her skin. “You look miserable.”

She tried to grin, but it felt foreign to her face, as if she didn't know how.

“Is it so terrible being in my arms?” he asked.

“No. I rather enjoy it. Perhaps too much,” she answered honestly.

But he said nothing else, just continued whirling her around the dance floor, marking the rhythmic beat of the waltz.

“Surely you can feign a smile for your husband after dancing with every other man in the room,” he snapped.

His anger shocked her. “Well, at least now I know you're aware of my existence.”

“What the devil does that mean? Were you intentionally trying to make me look like a fool out there? Flaunting yourself with all your other men? Charlotte, I realize you don't seem to care too much for your reputation,” he said through his teeth. “But I certainly didn't sacrifice my freedom and happiness to protect your reputation, only to have you demolish mine.”

She sucked in a breath, hating that tears pricked her eyes. Damn him for knowing how to hurt her.

“I believe I feel a headache coming on. I'll take the carriage home.” Then she turned and left him standing on the ballroom floor. He caught up with her a breath later, and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, playing the dutiful and concerned husband.

He made their excuses as they left the ballroom, ladening his voice with such worry as to express his affection.

Nausea swirled through her stomach, and she couldn't wait to get away from his touch. How had this happened to her life? How had one seemingly innocent kiss derailed her entire existence, ruining not only her life, but Edmond's as well. Because that was the truth of the matter. He was right, he'd sacrificed everything to salvage her reputation, and she'd thanked him by behaving like a spoiled child. Stomping her feet around to get his attention.

Something had to change. She wasn't entirely certain what, but she knew something did, before they were both completely miserable.

Fourteen



Edmond stared at the darkness of the carriage and knew he needed to say something. She was crying. He'd made Charlotte cry. Again. He was a damned monster.

"Charlotte," he said.

She sniffed. "Please don't."

The carriage rolled to a stop and Charlotte bolted out of it, nearly falling as she clambered to get away from him.

He ran after her, finally catching her as they reached the entryway. He pulled her into the study. "Charlotte, please at least allow me to apologize for what I insinuated."

She whirled around to face him, her eyes flaring with anger. "You insinuated nothing, Edmond, you merely accused me of having affairs and doing so with no discretion at all."

"I insulted you."

She barked out a laugh. "Honestly, you are daft sometimes." She reached over and smacked him on the chest. "Damnation, but you make me so angry. I've never struck another person before, and you've incited me to violence on more than one occasion, I believe." She exhaled slowly. "Allow me to remind you that I stood next to you in front of our families and friends, and pledged to be faithful to you. I

don't know what I've done to make you believe so poorly of me, but it does make me wonder why in the hell you offered to marry me when you clearly believe me capable of such wretched things."

"I never said I thought you were having an affair," he managed.

"Affairs," she corrected.

He motioned to the leather furniture. "Can we sit, please. I'm sure your feet are sore after all the dancing."

She rolled her eyes heavenward. "With all of my other men, right? And I'm perfectly fine standing, thank you."

He closed his eyes. "I didn't mean it that way." He scrubbed a hand down his face. "I was angry."

"Jealous, perhaps?"

He took steps towards her until their bodies were merely breaths apart. "You're damn right I'm jealous. You're my wife, Charlotte. Mine!"

"That doesn't even make any sense. How can you possibly be jealous when you don't even want me for yourself?"

He staggered back slightly, as if she'd struck him. "You think I don't want you?"

"It's the only thing that makes sense." She released a slow breath. "I don't want to argue anymore," she said. "I'm tired."

"I'm not trying to fight, but you saying that I do not want you is patently false." He wasn't going to let this go.

She lifted her gaze to him. "Say what you will, but I've seen the truth behind your actions."

He closed the distance between them so that the firmness of his chest brushed against hers. “What the devil does that mean?”

“Honestly, Edmond, why don’t you just tell me what you truly think of me? It is not as if it will make this sham of a marriage any worse.” She put space between them, walking to the window of the study because she couldn’t bear to be so close to him.

The muscles along that ridiculously square jawline of his tightened. The bow of his lips was so defined. Perhaps on a less masculine face, his mouth would look feminine. But there was nothing feminine about Edmond. No, he exuded masculinity as if it seeped from his very pores. Why did he have to be so handsome? So dashing?

“All right,” he said, his nostrils flaring. “You’re spoiled.”

What had he just said? Her mouth opened and her eyes narrowed. “What did you say?”

“Spoiled, Charlotte.”

“Spoiled? That’s what you truly believe? Precisely which part of my life makes me spoiled, Edmond? The part where my family’s fortune has been spent on medical costs to care for my ailing father?”

Shock momentarily crossed his features.

She glared at him, daring him to respond. “Or maybe I’m spoiled because the gowns you purchased for me for our wedding were the first new dresses I’ve owned in more than three years. Oh, or perhaps I’m spoiled because I got myself compromised by a rogue in a mask, and then rescued by a prince among men who loathes me. Even loathes the idea of touching me.” She released a hard laugh. “Do you have any

idea how ironic that is? All the years with the suitors, being pursued and wanted, lusted after because I'm beautiful, and then this." She motioned to the empty space between them. "And you would make me beg to be" 'serviced,' to have my desires slaked." She swallowed thickly.



DAMNATION, BUT SHE WAS SPECTACULAR. STANDING THERE IN front him, her vibrant sapphire eyes flaring with anger, her glorious breasts heaving in frustration. He'd wanted this woman for years. Had used his hand on himself more since their wedding than he had when he'd been a boy, first learning how to tug an erection. Yet he'd been denying himself, denying her, for what? To punish her? Or to punish himself for getting them into this mess, and still not telling her the truth?

Right now, it didn't even matter.

She was right, too. She wasn't the spoiled, petulant girl he'd forced himself to believe she was.

He walked towards her, closing in on her.

Her eyes widened and she took several steps backwards, but he kept pursuing.

"You believe me loathe to touch you?"

"At the very least, indifferent."

"Indifferent?" He barked out a laugh. "I feel many things for you, Charlotte, but indifference is not one of them." And then he was upon her, pressing her back against the window and slanting his mouth against hers. There was no gentle

seduction, no sweet little kisses. No, he put his hand at her neck and held her still while he devoured her mouth.

When they finally parted, they were both breathing heavily. Her eyes were glazed with desire.

“Does that feel indifferent to you?”

She swallowed and shook her head.

He grabbed her hand and dragged her to the door. He pulled her along behind him as they left the study and climbed the stairs to the second floor. Neither spoke as he led her to his bedchamber.

“We are not to be disturbed,” he barked to his valet.

“Yes,” the older man said with a nod.

Edmond closed his bedchamber door and locked it. He didn't turn around to face Charlotte. Not yet.

“Remove your clothing,” he said.

“I beg your pardon?” she asked.

“You heard me.”

“What if I want you to do it?”

He spun around. “If I touch you now, I'll simply tear those garments from your body and take you up against this door. Is that what you want?”

She opened her mouth to answer and frowned slightly. “I don't know how to answer that.”

“Take off your clothes, Charlotte.”

She turned, presenting him with her back. “I do require assistance. I cannot contort my body in a way to reach the buttons back here.” She gathered the handful of strands of hair

hanging from the coiffure, and held them up and off of her neck.

He resisted the urge to count the number of tiny buttons lining her back. It would be easiest to grab onto either side of the buttons, and just tear the material apart. Those delicate little nubs would fly all over his bedchamber with a solid yank. It would be satisfying to hear them ping around. But it was also unnecessary.

He slid the first button from its confines. Then the second, and so forth, until the plackets of the dress opened across her back. And that was where his patience ended. He shoved the gown off her shoulders and down her body until the fabric pooled at her feet. And then he ripped. First the underskirt. He grabbed a small knife he kept on his bureau and used it to cut through the laces on her corset.

“I’ll buy you new ones. I’ve tried to stay away from you, sweetheart. I’ve tried so damn hard.”

“Why?” She looked over her shoulder at him, her blue gaze searching his.

Why, indeed. To convince himself he didn’t want her? That he could be near her and not touch her? To punish her for being so damned tempting? Punish himself for continuing to lie to her?

He shook his head. Then spun her to face him. He ripped the thin fabric of her chemise until it fell off her shoulders. “I don’t know. Because I’m a damned fool.”

“But you do want me?” she asked, the words barely out of her mouth before she bit down on her bottom lip.

He took her hand in his and pressed it to the bulge behind the front of his trousers. “Yes, I want you.”

“Then have me.”

He tore at the fastenings on his pants. “This first time will be fast, and I apologize. I’ll make it up to you.”

She nodded her head, her pale skin flushed with desire, her nipples hard beads begging for his attention.

He dropped his pants, then grabbed her by the hips.

“Wrap your legs around me,” he told her as he lifted her and pressed her back to the door of his bedchamber. “Are you wet enough?” He reached between them, finding the slit in her bloomers. He’d run out of patience to remove all of her clothes. He thumbed through her folds. She was slick and hot. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he murmured. “But this first time, there’s not much that can be done to dull the pain. It will just be a second..”

“Edmond.” She grabbed his face and forced his eyes to meet hers. “I am your wife and I want this too. Please.”

It was all the encouragement he needed. He reared back and entered her slowly, pressing her back firmly against the door. Sinking into her wet heat was like coming home, and he didn’t want to consider what that implied.

He swore. “You’re all right? I’m not hurting you?”

Her fingertips dug into his shoulders and she shook her head.

He began to move, and with every thrust he must have hit a perfect spot because her eyes would round and she’d suck in a breath.

“Edmond!” she shrieked his name, her tone slightly alarmed.

Again and again, he moved, and she started chanting “yes, yes, yes...”

He wasn't going to last much longer. “You feel so good, sweetheart, so damn good.” His climax raced down his spine and he pulsed into her, burying his face in her neck. She shattered around him, crying out and clawing at his shoulders.

When the pulses of pleasure had subsided, he cradled her bottom in his hands and pulled her away from the door. He carried her to the bed and placed her onto it, then climbed in behind her. He snaked his arm around her waist, then wrapped himself around her—her back to his front.

“Perhaps we should argue more often,” she murmured.

He chuckled. “Try to get some sleep.”

“But you said the first time. That implies a second time.”

“Are you going to always be this demanding and insatiable?” He nuzzled her neck.

“It's definitely possible.”

“Give me a few moments to recover then.” His palm slid up, cupped her breast, and she arched into his touch.

Fifteen



Edmond woke to the rounded backside of his wife nestled against his body. Things had changed between them the night before. He'd been such a damned fool. Depriving each of them of a real marriage. That ended today.

He needed to tell Charlotte the truth about Jack, about their compromise, and about his feelings. She deserved to know. He would tell her everything today.

He ran a palm up her bare thigh, and across the curve of her hip.

She stirred, arching back into him.

Oh, to be able to touch her freely. Everything about her body felt custom-made for his hands, his mouth, his cock. She belonged to him. "Good morning, sweetheart," he said, leaning down and nibbling at the back of her neck.

"Good morning," she said, her voice sleepy. She rolled towards him, exposing one pert breast.

He had no sooner sucked that nipple into his mouth, then a knock came at their bedchamber door.

"What?" he growled.

"Master Edmond, my apologies in disturbing you." The valet's voice came from outside the door. "But mistress

Charlotte's sister is here and it seems to be urgent."

"Frannie?" Charlotte sat upright.

"We'll be right down," Edmond said. He helped Charlotte from the bed and rubbed her arms. "I'll ring for your maid. You go and get dressed in your room and we'll meet downstairs. All will be well."

Fifteen minutes later, they both stepped downstairs to find Charlotte's younger sister pacing the foyer of their townhome.

"My apologies for waking you so early," Frannie said. Her eyes darted in Edmond's direction, then back at her sister.

"Is it Papa?" Charlotte asked.

Frannie nodded, her eyes wide and glassy.

Charlotte closed her eyes, and Edmond's heart lurched in his chest. The conversation he intended to have with his wife would have to wait. Her family needed her, which meant she'd be needing him.

"I'll ready a carriage," he said.

"There is no need, Edmond," Charlotte said. "There is nothing anyone can do."

He reached out and cupped her elbow. "I'll escort you both. And I will be there should you need me."

"Perhaps when we get there, Frannie, you could give Edmond a tour of the gardens," Charlotte said.

Something was clearly amiss, but Edmond wasn't certain what it was. He knew one thing though—his wife was keeping a secret. And she was visibly nervous about him discovering it. All she'd ever said was that her father was ill, but that was

the extent of the details she'd given. It was much like what he would tell someone about his own mother's illness.

One thing Charlotte needed to understand though, was that she was his now. His to care for and his to protect. He'd be damned if he'd be sent out to the gardens during whatever played out inside the Reed townhome.

After the carriage stopped, he assisted Charlotte and her sister to their feet, then placed his hand against the small of Charlotte's back as they made their way up the front steps. The paint on the black door was in need of a new coat, and mortar between the bricks had crumbled in places.

He knew the Reeds were struggling for money. He also knew that Charlotte and Frannie did much to keep that truth from becoming fodder for the gossip mill. But that wasn't what tonight was about. He felt certain.

She eyed him when they got to the door, and he reached around her waist and squeezed her side. "Whatever you think I can't handle, you're wrong. You're my wife now and that means your family is mine. I'll protect them as well as I protect you." He kept his eyes on hers until he saw her release a shuddering breath. Then she squeezed her eyes shut, effectively pulling away from him.

Perhaps she'd resigned herself that he was going to be here, but she wasn't sharing anything of her own accord.

They entered the home and heard loud voices from a room down the corridor. Charlotte didn't bother looking at him again. Instead she stormed forward, directly into whatever upheaval awaited them. He followed Charlotte and her sister.

"Rutherford, please, you're going to hurt yourself. Or me," a woman's voice pleaded.

“Father, you really must sit down,” a young man’s voice said. “You are going to take a tumble and bump your head.”

They reached the doorway, and Edmond could see that the disturbance was in her father’s study. Her father was standing on top of his desk, waving a walking stick. He wore a dressing gown and sleep cap, and looked as if he weighed no more than a teen boy. Thin, wiry white hair stuck out from his cap and it appeared he hadn’t been successfully shaved in quite some time, as he had patches of white stubble along his jaw and chin.

Both Charlotte’s mother and younger brother were already in the room, doing their best to talk him down.

Charlotte stepped into the room. “Papa, I’m here now. Come, I want to read a new book to you.” Her voice was strong and no-nonsense.

Her mother and brother fell to the back of the room where he and Frannie stood. Charlotte continued to move forward, making her way straight to the desk. Edmond’s heart pounded relentlessly. She was going to get herself killed.

He made to move towards her, but a hand on his arm stopped him. He looked behind him and found Charlotte’s mother standing there, her gaze tilted to him. “Give her a minute.”

“He could hurt her,” Edmond said.

“Just a moment, and if I’m wrong, you may intercede. Please,” her mother said.

Keeping still and just watching was one of the hardest things he’d ever done. His wife was in danger of getting clubbed by a walking stick, and possibly getting toppled by her father. And Edmond was simply standing there, doing

nothing. But he knew enough to recognize that to these people—this family—this wasn't new.

Edmond knew all about protecting family secrets and managing issues that might appear frightening to an outsider. Some of his mother's outbursts had been close calls where any one of them could have been injured.

He'd give Charlotte a chance to turn things around, but he'd step in if things looked any more dangerous.

"Papa, come," Charlotte said again, holding her hand up to help him from his desk. He looked down at her, and something in his expression changed.

"Charlie? Is that you?"

"Yes, Papa, it's me. Come down and I'll read this book to you."

There was no wavering in her voice, no pause in her words, she was steadfast and strong. Edmond couldn't look away. His heart tightened in his chest, then double-thumped. As if it only just realized that it beat for her and for her alone.

Her father allowed her to help him down, and she gripped the older man's hand while leading him to the settee. She grabbed a book off the occasional table beside her and patted the seat. Once he had settled onto the settee, laying his head in her lap, she opened the book and began to read.

Charlotte's mother again touched Edmond's arm. "It has been this way between the two of them since she was very young. Rutherford is quite a bit older than me, so he was rather mature when we had Charlotte. He had already begun to exhibit symptoms of senility. It has only gotten worse and worse as the years have progressed. He cannot go out anymore."

“Has he ever hurt any of you? Or himself?” Edmond found himself asking.

“We’ve had a few accidents here and there. But for the most part he stays in his room. We used to have more assistance with him, but I fear the funds are not what they used to be,” her mother said. “He doesn’t usually get to this stage. Normally he’s more solemn, more grave.”

“And she...”

Her mother shook her head. “I’ve never really understood it. He’s always loved her the most. His Charlie, as he’s always called her. When she was young, she’d crawl up in his lap, pet his beard and sing him songs. She was utterly fearless of his moods. Even the times when he did not recognize her. She’d simply tell me that she’d be his new friend that day. Then she’d read. She started reading so early, loved books, stories or history or science, she didn’t care. She’d read constantly. Whenever she was missing, I’d inevitably find her hiding under a table with books surrounding her. He loved the sound of her voice, it would soothe him, still does.”

Sure enough, the older man had stopped yelling and instead was weeping, repeating, “I’m sorry, Charlie, I’m so sorry,” over and over again.

“Shh, Papa, everything will be all right,” Charlotte soothed as she ran her hand lovingly over his hair. Then she continued reading. It was the most maternal display Edmond had ever seen, and it was like an arrow to his heart.

“You know, he’s why she always said no,” her mother said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“To the proposals. All the gentleman who asked for her hand. She said no because she felt like since she and her father

had this connection, she needed to here for him. It took me a long time to figure that out.” Her mother shook her head. “I wish I’d seen it sooner. I would have intervened. But then she wouldn’t have you, dear.”

A moment later and the rest of the Reed family was in motion. Her brother, mother, and sister cleaned up a broken glass, an overturned potted plant and a myriad of scattered books. He, himself, stepped forward and picked up an overturned chair.

“Who’s that?” he heard her father ask quietly.

“That’s Edmond, Papa. My husband. Remember, I told you all about him before my wedding?”

“Is he good to you, Charlie?”

Her eyes lifted briefly to mine.

“Yes, Papa, he’s very good to me.”

Her father patted her hand and nodded as if to get her to continue reading.

For so many years, Edmond had tried to convince himself that Charlotte was vain and spoiled, when in reality she’d been protecting her father. Much in the way he’d protected his mother. His wife wasn’t spoiled or vain. No, she was giving, loving, selfless, and amazing, and he was going to spend the rest of their lives doing what he could to spoil her.

In the meantime, he called for a footman and made arrangements to call for the best doctor. This was his family now and he had funds to help make the remainder of Charlotte’s father’s time as comfortable as possible.

Sixteen



They had left the Reed townhome a half an hour earlier. Charlotte kept her father quiet until the new doctor arrived and was able to give him a light dose of laudanum. Her mother had wept and hugged Edmond fiercely when she found out he'd paid for constant care for her husband. If nothing else, perhaps the rest of the Reeds could get a decent night's sleep.

Edmond had only been in his own bedchamber for a handful of minutes—enough to remove his jacket, cravat and waistcoat. His linen shirt hung open as he scrubbed a hand down his face. Then, there was a quiet knock on the adjoining door between his room and Charlotte's.

“Edmond?” Her voice was quiet as she opened the door, though she didn't fully enter the room.

He stepped over closer. “Do you need something?”

“May I come in?” she asked, still standing in the partially opened doorway.

“Yes, of course.”

The sight of her as she fully entered his room made his mouth dry. She wasn't wearing anything particularly revealing, merely a night rail, but the worn fabric had seen better days. The sleeves had been removed, revealing the

graceful lines of her arms. She was so damned beautiful it nearly hurt to look at her. That black-as-night hair hung in a single, heavy braid over her left shoulder. Her blue, blue eyes watched him carefully. And a slight pink stain marred her otherwise flawless ivory cheeks.

Her eyes trailed the length of him, staring for a breath too long at his bared chest and abdomen. He turned away from her to remove his shirt and drape it over the chair in the corner. “Your mother said you read at a young age,” he said.

“Yes, I did. I believe she said I was around three years old. My grandmother, my mother’s mother, lived with us at the time, and she would spend hours reading to me.”

He turned to see her shrug, her eyes were locked on the Persian rug.

“I suppose I picked it up from her. Or maybe she taught me. I really don’t remember much, other than she loved books and had a fondness for biscuits.” She looked up at him then, her smile wistful.

He nodded at her. “I can’t remember if I showed you the library when I gave you a tour of the house, but I hope you know that you’re welcome to anything in there.” He scrubbed at the back of his neck. “Along those lines, I need to establish a line of credit for you to use as you see fit. I suspect you’d like some new clothes. Or if you want to redecorate any of the rooms.”

“Thank you for what you did for my father, getting the doctor and paying for the new care. It will help them so much, Edmond.” She shook her head. “I don’t need any new dresses.

“I have the funds, Charlotte. For whatever you need.” Why was he feeling so damned awkward? This morning he’d been

ready to tell her the truth about Jack, tell her how he felt about her. But today had been too much. She'd endured enough. His confession could wait another day.

“Would you...” She bit down on her lip, then seemed to steel herself before speaking again.

That bite on her lip and pleading look in her eyes tightened the knot in his stomach.

Her shoulders rounded back, which in turn, jutted those perfect breasts of hers forward. He knew they were perfect. He'd cupped them, felt the weight of them in his palm, the hard tip of her nipples scraping across his skin. He'd tasted them, suckled at her until she'd been writhing with desire.

“Would you hold me for a little while?” she asked.

Not sex, that's not what she wanted right now. She needed comfort. Of course she did. He was a damned fool, an insensitive idiot for thinking she'd come in here for pleasuring. She'd endured an ordeal with her father and shared her family's biggest secret in the process.

He swallowed. “Of course.” He held a hand out to her, then led her to the bed. He laid them down, on top of the coverlets. This was about comfort, not desire. He was a tall man, taller than plenty of men, and Charlotte, with her long, lithe body, fit him perfectly. She curled up against him, laying her head on his bare chest. He inhaled the scent of her. That curious blend of roses and lavender. He wanted to continue to breathe it in, imprinting it into his nose so that every breath from now until his last would be of her.

Absentmindedly, he ran his palm up her bare arm. “Are you all right?”

She released a breath and the warm air flickered across his chest. Not helping his lust or the beginnings of his erection. He could feel his cock growing heavy against his thigh.

“Yes,” she said. “I feel so selfish. For so long I worried about leaving him, and then once we got married, I became completely absorbed in myself. I am embarrassed to say that I have not checked in with my family for several days.”

“Charlotte, he is not your sole responsibility. And we’ve had a tumultuous beginning to our marriage. I apologize for that. I could have made things easier for you.” He squeezed her body tighter to his.

“His most recent doctor had told us that his death was likely approaching. He has difficulty swallowing and breathing at times. If he gets a lung sickness, it would likely kill him.” She exhaled slowly. “I know it’s probably time. He’s suffered for so many years. And my poor mother. But I don’t suppose one is very ready to say goodbye to their Papa.” She sniffed.

“He retired from Society long ago, and for the most part, people don’t even ask about him, except to inquire about his health. That’s been our story for years. That he has failing health. He’s nearly two decades older than my mother so I suppose no one is surprised.”

Edmond found himself nodding. That was what he and Willow told everyone about their mother as well. She was still vibrant enough to enjoy Society functions, but with them never knowing—from one day to the next—how she’d behave, they couldn’t risk it. In her most lucid moments, she even agreed with them.

“Your mother told me that’s why you always said ‘no’ to the proposals. Is that true?” he asked.

She sucked in a breath and was quiet for several moments. “Yes,” she whispered. Then she leaned up and met his gaze.

She was close enough to kiss. For him to lean forward and press his lips to hers. Instead he dipped down and placed a tiny kiss on the tip of her nose.

He squeezed her shoulder. “How much has Willow shared about our mother?”

A crease formed in between her brows. “Only that she’s been ill for a while.”

He nodded, stared at her lips some more. What the hell was wrong with him that he was thinking about putting his mouth all over her, rather than the comfort she needed? He was a randy bastard who hadn’t been rutting his new bride the way he’d been supposed to, that’s what was wrong.

Thankfully, she laid her head back down, taking with her the proximity of her mouth. It would be easier to not kiss her like this. He already was partially holding his breath, hoping she wouldn’t move her leg over the lower part of his body. One touch and she’d know he was aroused.

Back to the conversation about his mother, which should douse his lust. “She has hysteria. All her life, but evidently things became worse after she had us. I think the stress on her body.” He found himself stroking the outer edge of her bare arm. “She was the most fun when we were children. Behaving much like a child herself. She came up with the best games for us to play. But then she’d suddenly and inexplicably have bad days. She’d become paranoid, frightened of her own shadow, frightened of irrational things for Willow and myself. Somedays the tears were incessant.” He understood the lengths one would go to protect a parent.

“I never knew,” Charlotte whispered. “Willow never said anything.”

“We don’t talk about it much, so I’m not surprised Willow never told you. I believe Amelia knows more, but only because Amelia has a way about her, interjecting herself into your life without you even noticing until she’s there. Like a wart.”

Charlotte released a giggle. “That’s not very nice.”

“I mean it with all the fondness of a brother towards his younger sister.”

“Is that how you think of me? As a sister?”

He chuffed out a breath. “No, Charlotte, that’s not at all how I think of you.”

She was quiet for several moments, and he would have sworn she’d fallen asleep. But then she spoke again. “Do you want me to go back to my own bed?”

That was a damned trick question if he ever heard one. Women were excellent at such things. “No, what I want is to bare your skin and lick you all over. But I’m trying to be a gentleman because you’ve had an exhausting day. And you can always be in my bed. Our bed. Move your things into this room if you’d like.”

“You want to make love to me again?”

“Very much. But I can wait, sweetheart. I can just hold you.”

“What if I want you to make love to me, though? I think your touch would comfort me and help distract my mind,” she said.

She stood from the bed and pulled the nightgown off her body. He leaned up and stared at her. The night before, they'd been hurried and passionate and while he'd touched her everywhere, he hadn't taken the time to simply look. She unbraided her hair so that it hung loosely down her shoulders in an ebony curtain.

He allowed himself time to take in the sight of her long, supple body. Starting at her toes and working his way up, he noted the elegant arch of her foot and the slenderness of her ankles. Her legs were, in fact, long and shapely, just as he'd imagined they would be. They stretched gracefully up to her hips, and he wanted nothing more than for her to wrap them around him as he took her. There, between her legs, was the triangle of dark curls that hid all her pleasures. Perfect hips moved into a narrow waist and highlighted her flat stomach. He wanted to dip his tongue into her navel simply to feel her muscles tighten beneath his touch. Then dip his tongue inside her hot channel and taste her honey that he could now scent.

He stood and walked to her. With his right hand he pushed her hair back, tucking it behind her ear. Then he leaned forward and pressed his lips to the column of her neck. Her pulse flickered beneath his mouth and he breathed in her scent.

“You smell like coffee,” he said.

He felt her shiver, then swallow, as he placed another open-mouthed kiss to her throat. “I had some earlier. Guilty pleasure, I'm afraid. Never been much of a tea drinker.”

The rich, heady aroma seemed to suit her, and he wondered why he'd never noticed it about her before. Dark, rich, and exotic, just like her.

“Your body is perfection, my wife.”

“I have thought the same about you. At least the parts that I’ve seen.” She reached forward, grabbed his trousers, and worked on the fastenings. While she did that, he cupped her pale, creamy globes. Flicked her dusky pink nipples that hardened under his gaze.

He slid his hand to her waist and pulled her to him. “You have no idea how long I wondered about the length of your legs,” he murmured. He licked and nipped at her neck. “Or the precise shade of your nipples. I thought about that as well.”

“Edmond, that isn’t proper.”

“It is what men think about.”

He continued to nuzzle her neck, nibbling and licking along the silky column of her throat.

He grabbed her chin and tilted it so they could make eye contact. He loved how tall she was, that he didn’t have to stoop to reach her mouth, yet shorter enough that she had to look upward. “I find an enormous amount of satisfaction in knowing that the rest of the rakes in London will never know the answers to those questions.” He bent to suck a nipple into his mouth, then treated the other to the same treatment until they were both stiff peaks. “They are the shade of the light-pink roses that bloom behind my parents’ home.”

Still holding her chin in place, he lowered his mouth to hers. He moved his lips across hers, little nipping kisses just to tease, get her used to him touching her. He sucked her bottom lip into his mouth. Her hands came up to grip his biceps, holding him in place.

That’s when he slid his tongue against the seam of her mouth, asking for entrance, which she granted with a whimper. The depths of her mouth were warm, tasting of coffee and

sinful promises. God, how he wanted to have her wrap that mouth of hers around him, that tongue that swiped up against his to slide up and down his cock. He was so hard at the moment, it was a wonder he hadn't frightened her. She had to be able to feel the length of him pressing against her belly.

Then she surprised him by reaching into his drawers and wrapping her fingers around the steely length of him. He hissed out a breath.

They continued kissing, taking and giving, learning each other. Their tongues caressed and slid, and battled one another. It was the most erotic kissing he'd ever experienced. Her fingers continued to explore his cock while her other hand worked to rid him of his clothing.

He deepened their kiss, taking what he wanted from her mouth as he walked her backwards to the bed. Still he fondled her breast, and the erotic little noises coming from her throat were enough to send him over the edge. If he were a lesser man, with less control. He slowed the kiss, then stepped away from her. He kicked off his remaining clothing and stood still for a moment so she could see him.

Desire burned bright and hot in her cobalt eyes, and she looked somewhat dazed. She wanted him, there was no denying that.

"You are so hard and strong everywhere," she said. She trailed a hand down his chest, mapping his muscles.

His flesh heated as her gaze roamed over his chest. Blatant feminine appreciation and desire transformed her eyes, the black of her pupils swallowing the blue.

He forced himself to take a fortifying breath.

Against her fair skin, the flush of her arousal had stained her chest and cheeks. Her nipples had darkened, standing out boldly, daring, no, begging him to look. As he visually perused them, they puckered even tighter. He reached out and cupped one breast, relishing the weight of it in his palm. Her flesh was warm to the touch, and as he kneaded her sensitive flesh, she closed her eyes, and her mouth fell open.

One of her hands went to his bare abdomen and as he sucked her harder, her fingers tightening on his flesh. Her nails scraped across his skin. He liked that she hadn't asked to touch him. Just reached her hand out and gripped him because she wanted to, or simply needed to put her hands on him.

He kissed her again. His tongue swirled into her mouth and melded to hers in a passionate dance that nearly boiled his blood. Her feminine sounds of pleasure tested his control, but he was determined to take his time and to give her as much pleasure as he could.

Her breasts pressed against his chest and he could feel her hardened nipples scraping against his skin. "I've never been this hard, Charlotte. Never wanted a woman more."

"I want you too," she said.

He gripped her hips. "Did you mother have that special conversation with you before your wedding night, my wife?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"So you know how it is between a man and a woman? In bed?"

"Yes." Then she giggled. "She never told me about relations up against a wall."

"I should have been more gentle for your first time."

She shook her head.

“It was perfect. I needed to feel how much you wanted me.”

“I bet your mother left out a few other details.” He caught Charlotte’s gaze and stared into her eyes.

She swallowed visibly. “Like what?”

He licked his lips and pulled her tighter to him, still gripping her hips. “I can’t decide what wicked thing to do to you first. There are so many scenarios I’ve played in my mind for years. Wanting you from afar. Watching you flirt with every damned fool in London. Did you know I still wanted you?” His voice came out harsher than intended. He loosened his fingers and reached behind her to grab the rounded globes of her bottom.

“No, I didn’t know,” she said, her eyes wide, her lips parted. “I’ve always thought you did not like me very much.” She swallowed again. “What wicked things?”

He cocked an eyebrow. “You want me to tell you?”

“Yes.”

His thumb slid against her bottom lip. “I’ve imagined repeatedly pushing myself into your mouth, having these plump lips around me.”

She gasped, her eyes widening and dropping to his hard cock. She palmed him again.

He gave her a sly grin. “I’m guessing your mother left that possibility out.”

She nodded. “Do you want me to do that now?”

Desire surged so forcefully through him, he swayed on his feet. “Do you want me to put my cock in your mouth, sweetheart?”

“I want to try.”

“Lay down this way on the bed and roll to face me,” he told her, pointing to the foot of the bed. “I won’t be able to let you suck me long or this will be over too fast.”

She did as he bade, putting her head at the end of the bed and turning to face him.

“Perfect height.” He moved in front of her, gripping his shaft and squeezing the root. He tapped the tip of him on her lips, and her tongue slid out and licked him. “Christ.”

She looked up at him, licked him again.

“Open your mouth, Charlotte.”

Her lips parted and she opened widely.

He slid inside the warm, wet recesses of her mouth. “Close your lips, sweetheart, and just suck and lick on the tip a little. I might move some, but I won’t choke you. I promise.”

She nodded, and the movement nearly had him coming down her throat.

Her tongue moved in tandem with the rest of her mouth as she hollowed her cheeks and sucked. He pumped his hips, just moving in and out of her lips a tiny amount.

“Charlotte, sweetheart, if you only knew how perfect you look with your lips wrapped around my cock.”

She moaned around his length, her blue eyes locking on to his. She leaned forward as if to take more of him, but he pulled out of her mouth with a pop.

“Was I doing it wrong?” she asked.

“No, it was exquisite. I just want to last longer for you. And I really want to be inside you.” He climbed on the bed next to her. “Are you wet for me?” He reached down in between her legs and swiped his thumb through her folds.

She hissed and her knees nearly buckled.

“You’re soaked. Having my cock in your mouth aroused you, wife.”

Cupping her cheek, he met her gaze. There was indiscernible emotion behind the blue of her eyes. She searched his face, but said nothing. So, he kissed her. Unleashing his full desire upon her and positioning his body halfway across hers.

Her body was hot with desire. He could tell by the way she squirmed beneath his touch and the little moans that kept escaping that she was already craving her release. With one hand he moved to the dark triangle of curls nestled between her legs. She sucked in her breath.

He moved his fingers closer, and found her hot and slick beneath his touch. While his digits worked between her folds, cajoling and tempting her, he bent his head over her breast. First he licked, then he suckled, and her back arched off the bed. More and more he teased her, until her fingers threaded through his hair and her small moans of pleasure became cries of need.

“What other things did you imagine about me?” she asked, her voice so quiet he almost didn’t hear her.

He smiled against her nipple. His wife wanted to hear his wicked thoughts. Well, he could tell her while her brought her body to release. “Tasting you all over.” He pushed his finger in

and out of her all the while his thumb circled that tight bundle of nerves.

“Like you did that night in your study,” she said.

“Yes. I can lick this sweet cunny and bring you to release. Do you want me to do that right now? We can try it in new positions too.”

She was bucking against his hand, trying to chase her climax. “No, please don’t stop. But keep talking.”

“I imagined bending you over my desk and pushing into you from behind.”

“Oh God,” she breathed.

“You astride me, riding me hard, taking your pleasure from me.”

“Oh...oh...”

“Pushing you up against a wall and lifting your skirts because I couldn’t wait another damn minute before thrusting myself inside you. Which, as you know, did actually happen. That is not how I planned to take you the first time.”

And that’s when she broke. Her climax shook her entire body and she cried out his name, again and again. He couldn’t wait any longer. Moving himself on top of her, he notched himself between her legs. He leaned down and kissed her, and as his tongue entered her mouth, so he entered her body.

She squeaked when he was fully seated inside her and he stilled. “Did I hurt you, sweetheart? I can give it a minute so your body will adjust.”

She shook her head. “No, it feels so full and good. Please move.” She pulled her legs up, wrapping them around his waist and hooking them behind his back.

“Had you ever touched yourself, Charlotte, brought yourself to pleasure?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Never.”

“I have given you your only climaxes?”

“Yes.”

“I hope they feel as amazing as they look. You’re gorgeous when you fall apart. I’ll never get tired of how you feel wrapped around my body. Like you were made just for me.”

She felt amazing. So. Damn. Amazing. He was definitely going to have to make love to her more than once tonight. “One time won’t be enough tonight. One time will never be enough.”

His left hand snaked between their bodies. He found her clit and circled it as he pumped into her. She cried out at the sensation. He lost himself to the rhythm and could only concentrate on the pleasure building in his own body.

The muscles in her hot channel clenched around him as another climax hit her and her inner walls squeezed his cock. His own orgasm built and built until it splintered, and he spilled himself inside her.

Once spent, he fell onto her, covering her body with his own. Their hot breaths mingled and her leg still covered his backside. He swallowed the words he wanted to say. He wouldn’t tell her he loved her until he’d told her the truth about Jack.

Seventeen



Edmond had told her the night before that she could move into his bedroom. She was going to do it. Enough of them living separate lives. If they were to be in a real marriage, then they would be partners. They didn't have any more secrets, now that he knew about her father and she knew about his mother.

She continued moving her belongings into the drawer where she had decided she would put some of her things. And then her hand ran across something silky. She wrapped her fingers around the material and brought it out to inspect it. She unfolded the fabric to find a simple black domino mask. She dropped it as if it had stung her.

Her stomach shuddered. Her heart thundered so loudly, it pounded in her ears. Spots swam into her vision. She squeezed her eyes closed and willed the moment to go away. No, no, no. Anything but that.

It might not mean anything, she tried to convince herself. Plenty of people in London owned similar masks. It didn't mean that Edmond was the Jack of Hearts.

Except it did mean that.

She knew it with all certainty that she had married the notorious thief. And that Edmond—her husband—the man

she'd fallen head over heels in love with, had been lying to her from the very beginning.

She bent to retrieve the mask and balled it up in her hand. She'd been such a fool.

Edmond came into the room. His eyes dropped to the open drawer, and then to her hand.

She unfurled her fingers, letting the mask dangle.

“Charlotte, I can explain,” he said, holding his hands up.

“I can't believe you did this to me,” she said.

“Did what to you?”

“Are you going to deny it then? Try to tell me that you're not actually Jack? The original Jack, that is.”

“No, of course not. I fully intended to tell you everything. I was going to do it yesterday, but then everything happened with your father and it seemed like too much.”

She crossed her arms over her breasts. The tightening in her chest was unfamiliar. Was it anger? Hurt? Perhaps a combination of both. She loved this man and he had deceived her. “I need to know the full truth. When you compromised me as Jack, were you deliberately trying to ruin me? Did you ever intend to tell me the truth? I mean, Edmond, there were plenty of opportunities. All the discussions we had about Jack. And after the poetry reading.”

“Why does any of that matter now? I married you. I did the right thing. I compromised you, I did my duty to marry you and preserve your respectability.”

“Your duty,” she mimicked. She closed her eyes. “It matters because you lied to me.”

Edmond frowned. He did not move from his spot in the room though. He stood between both doors, the one that led to her adjoining bedchamber and the one that led to the corridor. As if he intended to prevent her from leaving should she try. “I never lied. You never asked me if I was the Jack of Hearts. I merely did not disclose the entire truth.”

“But you let me think you were making this huge sacrifice by marrying me. Let everyone think you were a hero for sweeping in to marry poor Charlotte, to salvage her reputation. When really you were just correcting your own damned mistake.” She took a few steps towards him, then stopped. She didn’t want to touch him. She wanted him to say something to make all of this go away, all the pain and discomfort swirling through her body. “You made me practically beg you to reconsider your proposal when I came to see you that night.” A wounded noise came from her throat and she tried not to fold in on herself. She was stronger than this. “You made a fool of me,” she whispered.

“What do you want me to say?” he asked, his voice rising. “Do you want me to admit that I love you? That I kissed you as Jack because I couldn’t resist you and this damnable power you’ve always had over me? That I knew you’d accept my advances as the rogue thief in a way you wouldn’t from,” he paused and narrowed his eyes, “what was it that you called me—quiet, solemn Edmond.”

“When did I call you that?”

He waved a hand dismissively. “Years ago, and that is not the point. The point is, I’d waited all those years to stop wanting you, and the desires never went away. So as Jack, I seized an opportunity I knew you would not give to the real me.”

“You never tried to kiss me as Edmond, how do you know I would not have fallen into your arms?”

“Charlotte, that is an insult to both of us and you know it. I did what I did.” He tossed his arms up. “Do you want me to admit that I was relieved when you were compromised, because it gave me a reason to marry you and I thought you would *have* to say yes? That I was hurt when you said no? Is that what you want me to say?”

Her breathing was coming more rapidly now and she realized the distance between them had changed. “Yes. I want to hear all of that.”

He cupped her cheeks and searched her face. “Charlotte, I have loved you since you were ten and seven. I will always love you. Though I loved you as a boy then, and now I love you as a man. Your man. Your husband.” He placed tiny kisses all over her face. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the truth before we got married. I was afraid you would say no.”

“I did say no,” she said with a watery laugh.

“Yes, well, I was afraid you’d well and truly mean it. And I worried that if I came clean about being the Jack of Hearts that I would get arrested and further tarnish your reputation, not to mention Willow’s and James’s, being an inspector. I didn’t want to do anything to jeopardize things with you. But then I did anyways, because I hurt you, while trying to punish myself in not letting myself touch you.” He pressed his forehead to hers. “I’m an idiot.”

“But you’re my idiot.”

“Does that mean that you could forgive me someday?”

“I will consider it. I might need several climaxes though, before I can change my mind. In the meantime, I do believe I

deserve to know the entire story,” she said.

“You absolutely do.”

Edmond took a sobering breath and moved over to the framed painting on the adjacent wall. He slid his finger under the rim, found the hidden lever, and flipped it, unlocking the painting from its place. It swung open, a door to his secret hiding place. He grabbed the box, now heavy from the weight of all the jewels, and brought it over to the bed, where he turned it upside down and dumped everything. A rainbow of jewels scattered across the coverlet.

Behind him Charlotte gasped. “Edmond!”

“We’ve talked about my mother and her illness. Over the years it has manifested itself in different ways. One of which was a gambling problem. She used her jewels, the jewels from my father’s family.” He shook his head. “She lost so many of them that the family coffers had dwindled. My father couldn’t do much because every extra cent went to any medical care she required. He did have the forethought to hide a small fortune away for when he has passed, when her care will fall to me and Willow. Mother has been unable to touch that. But the rest.” He shook his head. “It was squandered.

“Those pieces of jewelry, were family heirlooms. Passed down from her mother and my father’s mother. My family name is old and we’ve always enjoyed a fat purse. Then suddenly, it was gone. But I figured out a way to procure it back. I’d steal those pieces. Just the ones that had already belonged to us, that were rightfully ours. Those that people had taken advantage of my mother’s illness and won from her.” He exhaled slowly, raking his fingers through his hair. He didn’t dare look at Charlotte, he didn’t want to see her expression. “It didn’t take me long to realize that I couldn’t

very well only take those pieces unless I wanted to advertise to the entirety of Society that I was the masked thief. So I took other pieces as well.” He motioned to the glittering pile on the bed. “As you can see, I never did anything with those other pieces. They’re not mine, and would that I could figure out who they belong to, I would return them.”

“And your family’s jewels? What did you do with those?”

“I put a significant piece up for me and Willow.” He pointed to her left hand. “You now wear the ring I kept back for myself. It was to be for my wife.”

She clutched her hand to her chest.

“The rest I used to buy into games. Cards mostly. I’m rather good with them. I have a unique mind for numbers which allows me to win much more frequently than I lose. It took me about six months to secure enough funds to purchase this house. After that, I put aside the rest in separate accounts to save for Mama’s care. Some is invested and accruing interest.”

“You single-handedly saved your family from financial ruin?” she asked, though it didn’t sound much like a question.

“By thievery. It’s hardly altruism. Just as my proposal to you had hidden meanings. That mask has hidden much of me,” he said, though more to himself than to her.

She stood and wrapped her arms around his waist, then looked up at him. “We have both kept secrets for far too long. No more. From now on, we will be truthful with one another, please?”

“Of course, sweetheart. I will do anything for you, Charlotte. I’m sorry, I’ve been such a fool.”

“And I’m sorry I didn’t see you for so many years, standing right there in front of me, so fiercely handsome with wickedly talented fingers and lips. But a heart so big.” She looked up into his honey eyes. “I love you, Edmond. I am so very happy to be your wife, regardless of how it ended up happening.”

Epilogue



THE TIMES

NOTORIOUS JEWEL THIEF, THE JACK OF HEARTS, CAUGHT!

At approximately half of ten yesterday morning, the Metropolitan Police raided the residency of one Michael Blanchard, the Earl of Carrolton after an anonymous tip had been sent in to investigators. On the premises, constables found a considerable number of jewels that had been stolen over the last year, as well as newspaper articles he'd collected, written about his escapades. His one foray into violence thankfully did not end in tragedy as the maid he injured is now out of the hospital and expected to make a full recovery.

Charlotte snuggled into her husband's side as he read from the newspaper. He folded it over and tossed it onto the floor.

“So, it is over? Finally? We don't have to worry about the police coming after you anymore?” she asked.

“It is over, sweetheart.”

“We will never hear the end of it now from Willow and James since their plan worked so perfectly, but I’m thankful they came up with it.”

He pulled her closer, running his hand over her lower back. “As am I. And I’m pleased to have those jewels out of here. James said there was a decent chance they could be returned to their original owners. Eventually. It will be an arduous process, but that’s not my job.” He grinned at her.

“I love you, Edmond.”

“I love you too, sweetheart.”

He pulled her to him and kissed her, and there was no reason for words after that. His kiss was hungry and gentle at the same time. His hand slid down to grab her waist and pull her to him. Their naked flesh connecting, him hard where she was soft. The hair on his legs and arms tickled her flesh.

He nibbled at her neck and the tops of her shoulders. His hands cupped her breasts. Her nipples immediately hardened at his touch and pressed against his palms. He caressed her breasts while feathering hot kisses across her neck. Her breaths came faster until she exhaled in a soft gasp.

“I’ll never get tired of touching you,” he murmured.

“That’s good because I’ll never get tired of being touched by you. Your hands are magic.”

He flicked a nipple with this thumb. “So damn perfect.” He leaned over, pressed kisses to her breast. His tongue flicked against her nipple, then he suckled it into his mouth.

Her fingers thread into his hair.

He stripped back the coverlet, and it fell in a crumpled mess onto the floor. He gently pressed her down to the bed so

that she was lying on her back. He nibbled at her inner thigh, laving kisses up the inside of her legs. She squirmed beneath his attentions, moaning and whining his name. His hot mouth covered her center.

He dipped his tongue in, and she bucked against him. He grabbed her hips to keep her still as he licked and suckled her folds. Her sensitive little nub got most of his attention, while he plunged a finger in and out of her.

And then she climaxed. Charlotte cried out his name again and again as her body rocked with the waves of her orgasm. He crawled up her body, kissing each breast. Then his lips found the sensitive spot on her throat and she arched into him.

He pulled up to his knees and eased himself inside her.

“You like to watch, don’t you?” she asked.

“Watch my cock disappear into your hot body? Yes, I love to watch. We can move into a position so you can watch.”

“Next time.”

He pushed her knees up, and started thrusting.

Her breathing became tighter and shorter. Her release was so near. She teetered right on the edge while he moved deeper and deeper, increasing his speed.

His honey eyes locked on hers and didn’t look away as he took her.

“I love you, Charlotte,” he said as he pounded into her.

Her body clenched in a powerful release. His stomach tightened as shot rope after rope of his seed into her.

“I love you, Edmond. You’re so much more exciting and passionate than a masked thief. Because you’re my husband,

and you have my heart forever.”

About the Author

A life-long lover of stories and adventure, it was either become a stuntwoman for the movies or live out those adventures from the safety of her PJ's and computer. National best-selling and award-winning author, Robyn DeHart chose the latter and couldn't be happier for doing so. Robyn also writes steamy contemporary romantic comedies as USA Today Bestselling Author, Kat Baxter.

You can find Robyn online in a variety of places.

Sign up for Robyn's newsletter www.robbyndehart.com/newsletter/

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What others say about Robyn's books.

"Robyn DeHart's vibrant characters sweep the reader into a clever and sensual romp that is not to be missed." - Julia London, NYT Bestselling Author

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"Sizzling romance...DeHart makes the romance believable and enticing." - Publishers Weekly

"DeHart is a genuine treasure." - Booklist

"Robyn DeHart has become one of my favorite authors...where she shines is in creating character... DeHart's romances are tender and adventurous, and funny enough you may laugh your nethers off." - FreshFiction

"One of the best historical romance authors writing today." - Shana Galen, National Bestselling Author



I Kissed an Earl



(AND I LIKED IT)

MARRY FARMER

One



Dunegard Castle, near Ballymena, Ireland – July, 1888

It was widely known throughout County Antrim, and Ireland in general, that the O'Shea family were wicked, scandalous, and unruly in every way imaginable. Particularly the ladies of the family. Young ladies with the surname O'Shea had been causing trouble and upsetting apple carts for generations. That went double for the untamed sisters of Lord Fergus O'Shea, Earl of Ballymena. All four of them. They were headstrong, opinionated, and a bit too enamored of the freedom their brother allowed them when he was away in England.

The sisters had taken up residence in a seaside cottage, where they had the audacity to live independently, in spite of being the daughters of an earl and ladies in their own right. They insisted on cooking their own meals, washing their own laundry, and keeping their own house. It was unspeakably scandalous. When asked, the eldest sister, Lady Shannon O'Shea, would argue that every woman, regardless of her rank, needed to master domestic skills, otherwise they would be completely at the mercy of others. And the O'Shea sisters had no intention of being at the mercy of anyone. Because one never knew which way the wind would blow when it came to

the fortunes of the aristocracy, particularly the Ascendancy. So the sisters took their lives and their upkeep into their own hands, flouting convention, scandalizing their neighbors, and generally shocking both high and low with their wildly unusual views of the world and a woman's place in that.

But all that was about to change.

“It has come to my attention that I have been remiss in keeping my eye on you,” Fergus said with a frown, addressing his sisters from his wheelchair in the family parlor of Dunegard Castle one summer morning. “And since I only have one eye left, it's even more important to use it wisely.”

Marie O'Shea felt a wave of intense anger, in spite of her brother's jovial mood. She would have murdered the English dogs who attacked and nearly killed her brother several years ago, if the main perpetrator hadn't already been killed. Fergus was still as handsome and wily as the Devil, but he would forever be confined to a wheelchair now, in spite of the efforts of his friend and personal physician, Dr. Linus Townsend, to teach him to walk with crutches, and he'd lost an eye in the attack as well. Although he did look rather roguish wearing an eyepatch. His wife, Lady Henrietta, certainly thought so. She stood by Fergus's side now, grinning far too much for a woman whose husband was taking his sisters to task.

“Therefore,” Fergus went on, “on the advice of the esteemed Lady Coyle here—” he gestured to the stoic, grey-haired lady standing on the other side of his wheelchair—a woman who saw it as her business to oversee the lives of every eligible young lady in the county, “—I have decided to evict you from your seaside home.”

“What are you saying?” Shannon said, her expression turning stormy.

“You can’t be serious,” Chloe, the youngest sister, followed, crossing her arms.

“I knew something horrible would happen,” Colleen, one of the middle sisters, along with Marie, said with a sigh.

“I should have put my foot down years ago,” Fergus went on. His mouth twitched into a wry grin. “That’s a bit of a challenge for me these days as well.”

“Fergus, how can you joke at a time like this?” Marie said, stepping forward and planting her hands on her hips. “You’ve never had a problem with the four of us living at the cottage before this. We’ve always just gotten along, minding our own business, not hurting anyone.”

Lady Coyle snorted. “Not hurting anyone?” she repeated incredulously. “What about the emotional distress you have all caused the residents and shopkeepers of Ballymena?”

Marie blinked and stared at the woman. “We haven’t done anything to any residents or shopkeepers.”

“We do a lively trade with them,” Shannon seconded her. “And more than a few of the pubs in town have appreciated our beer.”

“And we will never reveal our secret recipe to a soul,” Chloe said with a sparkle in her eyes.

Lady Coyle huffed as though the sisters had insulted her dignity and shook her head.

Fergus couldn’t seem to stop grinning, but fought to school his expression all the same. “Surprisingly, several of the residents of Ballymena are unhappy with ladies of the local aristocracy making and selling beer. They aren’t too pleased with the lot of you wading in the sea with your skirts tied up around your waists either.”

“Or with the four of you dragging that telescope out in the middle of the night where men on their way home from the pub can see you,” Henrietta added with a grin.

“What do those lecherous pigs care if we have an interest in astrology?” Chloe asked.

“Astronomy, dear,” Shannon corrected her.

“Oh. Yes,” Chloe said, looking sheepish, as though she had meant what she said. She was a Gemini, after all.

“If you ask me, there are quite a few people around here who should be minding their own business,” Marie said, arching one eyebrow at Fergus. They’d done perfectly well with him away in England. As much as she loved her brother, part of her wished he were back there now.

“I don’t mind if you all have minds of your own and use them,” Fergus said with a shrug, “but as it turns out, others do.” He shot a sideways glance to Lady Coyle. “Furthermore, it has been brought to my attention that the lot of you are perilously close to being on the shelf. Shannon, you’re just shy of thirty.”

Shannon opened her mouth to protest, but before she could say anything, Lady Coyle hissed, “It’s unconscionable that none of the four of you are married, and at your ages. As I have explained to your brother, there are more than enough men of suitable title and fortune eager to marry the sisters of an earl, no matter how *lively* they are. The time has come for all of you to wed.”

The sisters gaped and snorted in offense, shaking their heads and huffing.

“I don’t object to marriage,” Marie said, narrowing her eyes at her brother. “I’d rather like the excuse to have a man in

my bed.”

Lady Coyle groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose. Marie’s sisters laughed.

“Come to think of it, you’re right there,” Colleen said.

“I wouldn’t mind a strapping, virile man at all,” Shannon agreed.

“As long as he’s a Leo,” Chloe added. “Or Aquarius. I suppose Aries would do.”

“Good. It’s settled, then,” Fergus said, a little too forcefully, as though the sisters had just walked blissfully into a trap. “Pack up your things and bring them back to the castle immediately. I’ll have all your old bedrooms prepared for you.”

“Now hold on just a moment,” Colleen led the protests.

“This isn’t fair,” Marie huffed.

“We’re perfectly fine at the cottage,” Shannon said.

Fergus held up his hands against the onslaught of protest. “Enough of that, now, ladies,” he said, silencing them all. By his side, Henrietta had to hide her mouth in her hand to stifle her laughter. Marie bristled at the gesture, but Fergus went on before she could say anything. “I’m determined to marry you four hellions off,” he said. “And to do that, even though it might kill me, I’m going to have to host gatherings and invite suitable men from respectable families to do things like dine with us.”

“Ugh.” Chloe grimaced. “I despise the word ‘respectable’.”

“Yes, I can imagine you do,” Lady Coyle said in a flat voice.

Fergus sent her a weary look, then focused on his sisters once more. “You’ll all move back to the castle. We’ll entertain and do all the things an earl and his family should do.” Marie and the others groaned in protest. “But,” Fergus went on, holding up a hand, “because I know how much of a trial this is for you, I have a peace offering.”

“What sort of a peace offering?” Shannon asked, one brow raised.

“Michael,” Fergus called toward the hallway, summoning his head footman.

Michael appeared in the doorway a moment later, as if he’d been waiting around the corner, listening for his cue in a stage production. He wasn’t alone when he entered the room, though, and he wasn’t empty-handed. Marie gasped and pressed a hand to her stomach as Michael and the other footman, Sean, entered the room, each of them wheeling two bicycles with them.

“Dear God above, those aren’t what I think they are,” Colleen said, leaping toward the footmen.

“Bicycles,” Chloe squealed, following her. Her expression lit to absolute joy. She immediately snatched one of the newfangled contraptions from Michael and gazed at it, enraptured. “Oh! These are the new safety bicycles Mr. Starley invented. I’ve been reading about them everywhere. They’re becoming all the rage in smart circles.”

“Oh, good heavens,” Lady Coyle groaned as though she might faint. “Lord O’Shea, what have you done?”

Marie didn’t wait around for the answer. She and Shannon rushed toward Sean, taking the last two bicycles from him. Marie’s heart raced as she pored over the amazing invention.

She'd played with bicycles where one wheel was enormous and the other was small, but both wheels of the machines Fergus had purchased were the same size. They were part of the new design that involved a chain to turn the wheels. The bicycle in her hands was clearly meant for a woman to use, as the chain had a metal covering to prevent skirts from catching in the mechanism.

"It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," she gasped, running her hand over the leather seat.

"It's clearly a bribe," Shannon said, though she couldn't pull her eyes off her bicycle.

"You are correct, dear sister," Fergus said. "I am giving each of you one of these machines in exchange for your cooperation in moving back into the castle and marrying men whom I deem suitable."

"You're not going to pick them out for us, are you?" Colleen said, snapping her head up and narrowing her eyes.

"Only if you make it necessary," Fergus said. "Otherwise, I'm more than willing to take suggestions."

Marie snorted at that, but her heart was still too full of her new plaything to pay much mind to her brother. She wondered how difficult bicycles were to ride. She'd seen illustrations, read instructions, and figured she'd do all right, but there was only one way to tell.

"I want to take it for a ride right this very moment," she said, glancing to her sisters.

"So do I," Chloe gasped with equal excitement.

"Go right ahead," Fergus said. "Provided you ride those things down to the cottage to pack your belongings and have them sent back to the castle."

The sisters stopped perusing their bicycles and snapped straight. Marie had been right to sense a trap earlier. That trap had closed around her as certainly as if she were a rodent who had just had its neck snapped.

“Do we have an agreement?” Fergus asked. “Those bicycles in exchange for your residence at the castle?”

The sisters exchanged looks. Marie knew immediately they’d all been had. The problem was, Fergus had chosen exactly the right bait for his trap.

“All right,” Marie answered first. “You win this time, dear brother. I agree to move back into the castle for the purpose of marrying me off. As long as whatever man you find who might be willing to marry me accepts Lucifer along with my hand.”

“Lucifer?” Henrietta asked, still having a difficult time not laughing.

Marie smiled at her bicycle. “That’s what I’m going to call it.”

Her sisters laughed. Lady Coyle looked as though she might faint.

“Let’s take them outside and see if we can ride them,” Shannon said, wheeling her bicycle toward the door.

“Yes, I’m determined to master this,” Colleen agreed and followed her.

They all turned their bicycles around and pushed them toward the hall. Before leaving, Marie called over her shoulder, “Thank you, Fergus. You’re going to regret this.”

“Don’t you mean I’m *not* going to regret this?” Fergus asked.

Marie laughed mischievously. “No, you will absolutely regret it.”

Judging by the sound Lady Coyle made as the sisters left, taking their bicycles out to the front drive, she believed Fergus had made an unforgivably grave mistake.

It was the perfect day to learn how to ride a bicycle. As soon as the four of them reached the front drive, they leapt into the task. The bicycles were clearly designed for ladies with skirts, though perhaps not as many petticoats as they all wore. Marie solved that problem by hitching up her skirt and removing the frilly petticoat she’d donned when the four of them were called to their audience with Fergus. She managed to make poor Sean blanch in the process. But immediately she discovered that it was far easier to mount and pedal a bicycle without a copious amount of fabric around her legs.

“It’s not as difficult as I thought it would be,” she called to her sisters as she propelled herself forward, making a large circuit of the front drive. “As long as you can keep your balance, the faster you go, the easier it is.”

“I’ve heard that about a few other things,” Shannon said with a wicked wink, pedaling her bicycle shakily.

The others were getting the hang of things, but slowly. Chloe didn’t seem comfortable sitting on the seat. Shannon stopped what she was doing to examine the bicycle to see if there was a way to make the seat lower. Colleen looked as though she could balance, but she wasn’t moving fast enough, and her bicycle kept careening to the side. By contrast, the more Marie rode around in the circle of the drive, the more confident she felt.

“Well, I’m off,” she said with a spritely air as she made a final loop around the drive. “I’ll see you lot back at the

cottage.”

If her sisters protested over the way she broke free and pedaled away from the castle, Marie didn't hear them. She shot down the long stretch of the drive that led to the front gate and the road, then picked up speed, flying on down the slight incline of the road.

It felt very much like flying as well, or what she imagined flying might be like. The wind whipped through her hair, pulling ginger strands out of the careless style she'd pushed it into earlier. She should have been wearing a hat, but she hadn't bothered to fetch hers before rushing outside with her bicycle, and she was glad for it. There was something magical about speeding along the road, sunlight glowing down on her, the green of the landscape around her meeting the blue of the summer sky. She could smell grass, wildflowers, and the salt of the sea. Sunlight baked her, and the more she pedaled, the warmer she became. Her heart thundered against her ribs with the effort of riding, but she loved every moment of it. If Fergus had given them the bicycles as a peace offering for taking away their freedom, he had the bad end of the bargain. Marie had never felt so free in her life.

The feeling lasted all the way until she reached the cliffs and sheltered coves of the sea. That was when she realized that, as beautiful as the world was and as joy-filled as her heart felt, stopping a bicycle was more of a challenge than starting one.

“Oh, dear,” she muttered to herself as she stiffened, staring down at the bicycle under her and wondering if there were some sort of braking mechanism. She should have checked before pedaling into high speed. The handlebar seemed to

have something of a brake on it, but she was too afraid of crashing to squeeze it with any enthusiasm.

In the end, she did the only thing she could think to do. She steered off the road toward a stretch of sandy beach. At the very least, the sand would cushion her fall if she ended up flying over the handlebars in her efforts to stop.

The grass dividing the road from the cove went a long way to slow the bicycle, and by the time she rolled out onto the sand, she'd lost enough speed to risk squeezing what she thought was a handbrake. Sure enough, the bicycle stopped completely. Marie let out a yelp as she jerked forward, then crumpled to the side as she lost her balance. She and the bicycle fell in a tumble of metal and skirts.

“Are you all right?” a rich, tenor voice called from the direction of the water.

Marie yelped again, embarrassed to have been caught crashing, and glanced around furtively. She saw no one close by on the sandy beach or near the small cliff that sheltered half of the beach from the road. The road was clearly empty, which meant the voice could only be coming from the water itself.

Sure enough, as she scrambled into a crouch, ready to stand, she spotted a man, just over waist-deep in the sea. He must have been kneeling, as he wasn't far out enough for the water to be that deep. His bare chest glistened in the sunlight, highlighting lean, toned muscles and whorls of dark hair that stuck damply to his skin. He had dark, curly hair on his head to match, dancing eyes, and a broad smile with surprisingly straight, white teeth. The sight of him thrilled Marie more than the bicycle.

She stood straight as quickly as she could, brushing sand from her skirt. “I am quite all right,” she said, her own smile

growing. “Just taking Lucifer for a turn about the countryside.”

“I take it Lucifer is your bicycle,” he said, his grin more mischievous than ever.

“Not that it’s anything to you, but yes,” she said, crossing her arms and striking a bold pose as she ogled his bare chest. The man knelt there in the water, fine as you please, not seeming to care that she was taking in the full sight of him.

“Oh, I see.” His smile widened. “How interesting for a woman to name a bicycle after a fallen angel.”

“It takes one to know one,” Marie said, unable to tear her eyes away from him.

He laughed. The sound was luxurious and exciting. It did things to her insides. Things that were exacerbated by the way the waves washed in and out around the man’s waist, giving her hints of far more than she should be looking at now and then. The bouncer wasn’t wearing drawers.

“And you’re certain you’re not injured in any way?” he asked, continuing to tease her with his eyes.

“Perfectly uninjured in every way,” she told him. “And yourself?”

“Oh, I’m grand,” he said, inching forward a bit and looking as though he might stand. “I was worried that you might have hit your head, you see.”

“My head?” Marie blinked, lowering her arms.

“Seeing as you seem unable to gather your wits about you or look away, like a well-bred young lady should.”

There was something tantalizing and challenging about his comment. Whether he was genuinely hinting for her to give

him a moment of modesty so he could wade out of the water to fetch his clothes—which she now saw sitting in a pile farther down the beach—or daring her to keep looking, she couldn't quite tell. So she chose to keep looking.

“My head is right as rain,” she said, then nodded to the parts of him below the water. “Is yours?” She said a quick prayer of thanks for all the rough language she'd learned through selling their beer to the local pubs.

“Perhaps you should judge for yourself,” he said.

And then he did the wildest and most shocking thing Marie had ever witnessed in her life. He stood up.

Water cascaded down his perfect form, sluicing over fine, strong hips and thighs, highlighting his narrow waist, and making him glisten like a mythical creature. But that was nothing to the sight of the dark hair around his groin and the bold, masculine shape of his balls and penis. The water must have been cold enough that he wasn't in any sort of an aroused state, but Marie hardly cared. There it was, bold as you please, kissed by sunlight, an impressive cock. The man had the audacity to rest his hands on his hips and grin like a fool as she drank in the sight of him, either not caring that he was on full display for her or reveling in it. Indeed, when she finally managed to get her eyes to snap up to meet his face, the man looked downright proud of himself for standing there as God made him. And God had made him well.

“It would appear that we have a bit of a dilemma on our hands,” he said, his voice lowering to a sultry timbre.

Marie almost didn't hear him. She was too busy staring. Her day had just turned far more interesting than she'd bargained for. “What dilemma is that?” she asked, pretending

nothing was amiss, even though she could feel her face heating.

“We haven’t been properly introduced,” the man said, obviously well-mannered and polite. Except for the whole shameless nudity thing.

He started toward the beach, veering off as though he intended to fetch his clothes. Marie wasn’t having any of that, though. She abandoned Lucifer in an instant and darted across the sand, intent on reaching his clothing before he did.

Two



Christian's heart shot to his throat—or perhaps an organ slightly lower—as Lady Marie O'Shea dashed toward his clothes on the shore. He knew who she was, of course. By sight and by reputation. He wasn't certain whether she recognized him. He'd been away at university and then on a tour of the continent, after all, and had only just returned home a few months earlier. And besides, a lady like Marie O'Shea would have no reason to know who the younger son of an earl of middling importance was.

She was after his clothes. That was all that mattered. He picked up his pace, splashing through the shallows toward the beach, cock swinging freely, trying to decide whether he hoped he reached his clothes before her or not. He wasn't in the habit of lying to himself, and frankly, he appreciated the look of bold interest that Lady Marie had given him. Appreciated it and more. If not for the cold water, he might have given her more to look at. There was still a danger of embarrassment on that front, but Christian didn't care. He was who he was, and he loved that about himself.

“Ha!” Marie shouted as she pounced on his clothes. She gathered them into her arms, then wheeled back as if she would hold them hostage indefinitely. “Now you're in a pinch.”

Christian splashed his way out of the water and across the beach to stand several yards in front of her, hands on his hips, cock hanging. He paused to catch his breath and grinned at her, then shook his head. “And what sort of a pinch is that?” he asked.

She didn’t even try to hide the fact that she was staring at him, so he didn’t hide how much he liked it. It certainly wasn’t the first time he’d engaged in conversation while swinging free. Although there was generally a great deal more alcohol involved, and he hadn’t been in that position since Italy.

Marie swallowed hard, then snapped her eyes up to meet his again as she hugged his clothes. For a moment, she wore a startled look. Then she burst into a sheepish laugh. “Do you know, I forgot completely what I was going to say.”

“Yes, I have that effect on people,” he said with a wink.

“Do you, now?” she asked, arching one eyebrow.

“I think it’s because of my blistering wit and magnificent intelligence.” He shifted his weight slightly, standing as though they were meeting in a ballroom and he was fully clothed.

Her lips twitched and her eyes danced with humor. “I suppose you’re exactly the sort of lad people like to invite to their parties, then?”

“That goes without saying.” Christian shrugged. Her gaze dropped to his groin again. He knew full well she was a lady, but that didn’t cool his urge to handle himself to see how she reacted. He refrained, of course. He might not have been anyone destined for greatness—his position in the family didn’t even warrant use of the prefix “Lord”—but his father

was an earl. A little decorum with a member of his own class was necessary.

But not enough to make any sort of move to retrieve his clothes from her.

“You still haven’t introduced yourself,” she reminded him in a hoarse voice a moment later, meeting his eyes again.

“I’m surprised you didn’t remember me on sight,” he said, taking a step forward. Her eyes widened and she snuck another look at his willy. “Christian Darrow?” he said, forming it as a question to see if the name would jog her memory. “Lord Kilrea’s errant and prodigal younger son.”

Marie’s mouth dropped open—which was entirely distracting, since she was still staring at his cock and the sight of her pink lips parted that way threatened to give her more than she bargained for to look at—and she gasped in recognition. “Aren’t you in Spain or some such?” she asked, gaze meeting his again at last.

“Yes,” he answered, trying not to laugh. “That’s where we are at present, is it not?”

Marie snapped her mouth shut and sent him a flat look.

“I must have gone for a longer swim than I thought and washed up on this shore instead of the one near Bilbao.” He winked for good measure.

“Well, then, you won’t be needing these.” She tossed her armful of his clothes behind her. “You can just swim back to Spain and fetch the clothes you left there.”

“I could.” He shrugged. “But who needs clothes on a fine, warm day like this. I trust you’re warming up yourself, Lady Marie?”

His pointed teasing didn't have quite the effect he'd hoped for. Any other fine lady whose acquaintance he'd ever made would be fainting with embarrassment at the sight of him. All of him. Part of him wanted to see how far he could push things to make Lady Marie faint as well. Except that if she hadn't already, if she wasn't falling all over herself in an effort not to stare at his naked body, he doubted there was anything short of vulgarity that he could do to put her off.

Not that he wanted to put her off. Quite the opposite.

God, he liked her.

After a heavy pause, she blinked and glanced up again. "You know who I am?" she asked.

"All of Ireland knows who you are, Lady Marie O'Shea," he said, adding a wink.

"Thank God," she said in a seemingly relieved voice.

Christian wondered if she truly was relieved or if he'd finally embarrassed her by mentioning her reputation. Her face was a little too pink, and her eyes sparkled a bit too much. Whether she was letting on or not, he'd unnerved her at least a little bit. Which was grand, as far as he was concerned.

Her gaze started to drop again, but she cleared her throat and crossed her arms. "So you're back in Ireland, then, Mr. Christian Darrow."

"I am," Christian said with a nod, unable to resist adding, "In the flesh." He peeked down at himself.

Marie burst into a snort that she had to hide with one hand to her mouth. "And what fine flesh it is too," she added, giggling as she did.

That was it. Christian was charmed beyond reason. He'd taken a shine to women on sight in the past, as they had to him, but the instant draw he felt toward Lady Marie went beyond any of those trifling feelings. Any woman who could endure his naked company with both appreciation and a snort of laughter was the sort of woman he wanted to be friends with. Or more. In spite of the fact that his father would chastise him for having no decorum or discretion. Perhaps because of it. His bloody father had never understood the way he enjoyed life. If his father had had his way, every man on earth would be boring and stolid and—

And the last thing he wanted to think about when faced with a beautiful nymph like Lady Marie was his failure to live up to his father's expectations.

“What brings you to this bit of beach that I thought was secluded enough for a dip in the middle of the afternoon?” he asked, shifting his weight but continuing to pretend there was nothing unusual about him having the conversation naked.

“My brother has just given me a bicycle,” she explained.

“Lucifer,” he said, proving he remembered the name.

“And I was exploring,” she finished.

“I bet you were,” he said, one eyebrow flickering.

She laughed out loud, and perhaps would have said more if a hint of movement from beyond the beach hadn't distracted them both. They turned to find an old woman—likely from one of the nearby villages—strolling along the road. She had a basket over one shoulder and was singing to herself.

“Quick,” Christian hissed, dropping to his knees on the sand. “When she sees us, pretend I've just washed up on the shore.”

“What do you—you can’t just—how do you expect—” Marie issued her flurry of protests, but giggled even harder as he flopped to his stomach, arms spread, feigning death. “Oh, you are a corker, aren’t you,” she mumbled, dropping to her knees beside him.

A moment later, the old woman’s singing stopped and turned into an alarmed shout.

“Help, oh, help!” Marie called out to her—a little overdramatic, but still admirable in her enthusiasm.

Christian jolted as Marie’s hands spread across his shoulders and she leaned closer to him. He could smell the faint scent of flowers and soap wafting from her in a combination he’d never known before. The heat of her body close to his was as delightful as the sun. He was glad he’d positioned himself face-down in the sand, because the effects of the cold water were wearing off fast as blood rushed to his cock.

“Please help me,” Marie called out, slightly quieter as the old woman’s footsteps swished across the sand.

“Oh! Oh, dear! Who is that?” the woman croaked, perhaps a little more alarmed than their impromptu prank should have made her.

“He washed in from the sea,” Marie said, just enough of a note of humor in her voice to hint that she sensed their joke could go too far as well.

“From the sea, you say?” the old woman asked.

“I was riding my bicycle, and I stopped to dip my toes in the water,” Marie told her, one hand still on his back as she twisted, presumably toward the woman. Christian had his eyes closed, so he could only guess what Marie looked like. “I was

sitting here on the beach, enjoying my day and watching what I thought was a magnificent seal playing in the surf. Then, all of a sudden, I realized it wasn't a seal at all. Before I knew it, the tide pushed him in, and he swept up onto the shore like this."

She ran a hand down his spine, briefly caressing his backside. It was all Christian could do to lie still as his cock jumped and pressed uncomfortably into the sand. Perhaps attempting to out-cheek Lady Marie O'Shea wasn't such a bright idea after all. He had no idea how he would get out of the predicament he'd found himself in with his dignity intact.

"Heavens above, child," the old woman gasped. "You must get away from him at once."

"But I cannot," Marie protested dramatically. "I feel drawn to him, captivated. Almost as though a spell were at work."

Christian caught himself hoping that she bloody well did feel captivated by him. That thought threatened to spoil his composure completely. He was supposed to be passed out, after all. He wanted to grin from ear to ear and learn more about Marie. Any woman who could play along with a prank moments after meeting him when he was as naked as the day he was born, was a woman he desperately needed in his life.

"Drawn, you say?" For a moment, the old woman sounded curious. Then she sucked in a hard breath. "Bless us all and saint's preserve us," she gasped. "Get away from the creature, woman. He'll capture you and drag you back into the sea for certain."

"But he needs my help," Marie sighed, both hands caressing his back now.

If Christian were a betting man, he would have said Marie was manhandling him with the specific intent of arousing him. Where in the bloody hell had a young lady from an aristocratic family got it in her mind to torture a man like him?

“He’s a *selkie*, girl,” the old woman scolded Marie.

“A...a what?” Marie asked with false innocence.

“A seal that’s taken human form,” the woman explained. Judging by the way Marie inched suddenly away from him, Christian assumed the old woman had grabbed her arm and attempted to pull her away. “He’ll steal you away into the sea, girl,” the old woman went on. “He’ll seduce you away from all that is good and holy, and that will be the end of you.”

“I’ve never been seduced away from all that is good and holy,” Marie said, almost as though she liked the idea. She was a woman who had named her bicycle Lucifer, after all.

“Hurry, child, hurry,” the old woman urged her. The shuffling of her feet across the sand hinted to Christian that she was trying to get away. “Get away before it’s too late.”

“But he’s so...alluring.” Marie returned to stroking his back. She might as well be stroking his prick for the reaction he had to her touch. Perhaps joking with the old woman had been a bad idea after all. “He’s so warm and magnificent,” Marie went on. She spread one hand across his backside and gave his cheek a squeeze.

Christian jerked and made a strangled noise. “Are you trying to get the two of us in a muddle?” he muttered, sand sticking to his lips as he did.

Marie lowered her voice to a vixen’s purr near his ear. “Are you going to seduce me and drag me back into the sea?”

It was too much. Christian burst into laughter, opening his eyes and peeking up at Marie. He scanned the beach quickly for the old woman. The poor dear was racing away on the road, her back to him and Marie. That was enough to convince him it was safe to get up—which he started to do, but stopped abruptly when he got as far as propping himself on his elbows. Rising any farther would be out of the question. He was already fully risen.

Marie inched back, a wicked grin tugging at the corners of her mouth, and sat with her hand bracing behind her. “I suppose it’s safe for you to go get your clothes now,” she said, nodding to his pile of clothes several yards away.

“Not at the moment,” he said with a sheepish laugh, face heating.

“Why not?” Marie glanced over her shoulder at the old woman’s retreating form. “She isn’t looking back this way, you know.” She faced forward again, staring saucily at him and biting her lip.

Christian laughed. “You’re the daughter of an earl, aren’t you?” he asked.

“I am.” Marie nodded. “Though it would be more accurate these days to say I’m the sister of an earl, since dear Papa passed many years ago.”

“The details are irrelevant,” Christian said, doing his best to appear completely at ease as his erection pressed into the sand. “Aren’t you too well-born and proper to have the sort of knowledge that would prompt you to know why I’m not getting up?”

Marie laughed aloud. “You have been away too long.” She shifted to lean forward, splaying across the sand in a similar

pose to the one he was stuck in, her face coming within inches of his. “Don’t you know that the Wicked O’Shea Sisters are the scourge of County Antrim?”

“Yes, well, I had heard you lot were a bit unruly,” Christian said in as off-hand a manner as he could manage.

“Unruly hardly begins to describe it,” Marie said, lowering her voice.

It suddenly occurred to Christian that sand did not mix well with a raging erection. He feigned utter composure, though, determined to ignore the irritation that wasn’t helping his body settle. “If this is how you comport yourself with men you’ve only just met, I’m astounded that your brother hasn’t locked all of you away in a convent.”

“We’re not Catholic,” Marie said, her voice more and more of a purr as she inched closer to him. She might not have had his cock to stare at anymore, but that didn’t stop her from gazing hungrily at his lips.

Which did nothing at all for his chances of standing up anytime soon. “If not a convent, then an asylum,” he said, matching her sultry tone. God, but he wanted to kiss her. He wanted to do more than that, if he were honest. And he wasn’t the sort to go around debauching aristocratic ladies on beaches. He’d caroused his way through university, enjoyed himself thoroughly in Europe, but it took coming home to Ireland for him to feel truly in over his head in matters of desire.

“My dear brother would have to catch me before he could put me in an asylum,” Marie went on, her lips only a breath away from his. “And poor Fergus has just made the fatal error of giving me the means to pedal away from him whenever I want.” Her eyes flashed as they met his. “What kind of

mischief do you suppose I might get into with that sort of freedom?" she asked.

"I cannot imagine," Christian said, pulsing with lust and feeling startingly on the back foot for a change.

"Fortunately," Marie went on, her breath tickling his lips and his heart pounding, "I have never been the sort to have a hard time deciding on things. I tend to know what I want the moment I see it."

"Oh?" Blast him, but his voice shook on the single-syllable word.

"And I've seen it, Christian Darrow," she continued, arching one amorous eyebrow, her full lips forming a wicked grin. "I've seen it all."

He started to laugh, but she stopped the sound by leaning toward him and kissing him soundly. She kissed him. Not that he wouldn't have kissed her just as hard himself, if he'd had the jump on her. He wasn't about to let her have the upper hand for long, though. Regardless of his state of arousal, he pushed himself up until he could reach for her and drag her into his arms. It was pure and utter madness. They'd barely met, but since when had formalities or time stood in the way of the absolute pleasure of kissing a woman who was game?

And Marie was most certainly ready for it. She slid her sandy arms over his shoulders and sighed deep in her throat as he devoured her mouth with giddy pleasure. It was wrong, mad, and the single most exciting thing he'd ever done. But most of all, kissing Marie, parting her lips so that his tongue could dance against hers, filled him with joy like nothing ever had before. One taste and he had the wild feeling that he would never be able to get enough of her. Not even if—

“Good God in heaven above, what is the meaning of this?”

The booming shout came from closer to the road. The spell that had been cast over Christian and Marie seemed to evaporate with a snap as the imposing form of Lady Coyle glared down at them.

“L-lady Coyle,” Christian stammered. He started to shift then realized there was no possible way he could untangle himself from Marie and her conveniently concealing skirts without causing them all a great deal more embarrassment than they were already suffering under.

“Oh, dear,” Marie gulped.

She started to move as well. She stood carefully, holding her skirts out to the sides as an effective curtain that allowed Christian to stand up as well. If only he wasn't half as *upstanding* as he obviously was. Although that situation was well on its way to deflating.

“I have never been so outraged in all my life,” Lady Coyle raged at the two of them, face splotched red. “I thought that I had seen the very nadir of behavior from you O'Shea girls, but this?” Lady Coyle squeaked.

“I'm terribly sorry, Lady Coyle,” Marie said, laughing nervously. “It was a joke that got a bit out of hand, you see.”

“A joke?” That made Lady Coyle squeal even louder. “You think this sort of gross impropriety is a *joke*?”

“It was only meant as a jest,” Christian said, backing Marie up and scrambling for a way to make the situation better.

He came up blank. Worse still, Lady Coyle's outrage only seemed to grow as she stared at the awkward pair he and Marie made.

“That is it,” Lady Coyle hissed. “Lady Marie, come here at once. Although I have only just come from there, I am taking you back to your brother at once.” She held out her hand and snapped her fingers for Marie to get moving.

“Um, er....” Marie hesitated, glancing over her shoulder at Christian’s sand-covered body.

“At once,” Lady Coyle shouted. “We will avert our eyes so that Mr. Darrow may make himself presentable.”

“I doubt that’s going to happen anytime soon,” Christian muttered against Marie’s ear.

Marie snorted into laughter, but that only enraged Lady Coyle.

“Lady Marie, if you do not get away from that man and accompany me back to your brother’s house this instant, I will make certain that not a single respectable house in all of Ireland will accept you, not a single person will claim to know you, and your brother will be forced to send you to the very darkest asylum in Peru.”

“You see?” Christian murmured. “I told you it would be an asylum.”

“Ssh,” Marie hushed him, clearly having a hard time suppressing a giggle. “I’m coming, Lady Coyle. And I am ready to accept whatever punishment you and Fergus see fit to dole out.” She stepped away from Christian, starting toward her bicycle. A few yards away, she glanced over her shoulder, giving Christian’s sandy body a once-over. “It was worth it,” she said with the most wicked grin Christian had ever seen.

Lady Coyle fussed, Marie fetched her bicycle, and the two of them walked off as Christian dashed out into the sea again to wash the sand off his body. His mind reeled from the wild

turn his morning had taken. He let the cold water do its work, shriveling his balls almost as effectively as Lady Coyle had. He wouldn't be able to get Marie out of his blood any time soon, though. One kiss, and he was gone. Suddenly, he was bloody glad he'd come home after all his adventures.

Three



“Never, in all my days, have I ever so much as *heard* of anything as wicked and shameful as what you’ve done,” Fergus shouted at Marie the next morning. “And in broad daylight, by the side of the main road as well. It’s unconscionable. It’s reckless. It’s....”

Fergus dissolved into red-faced trembling, apparently unable to find a word bad enough to hurl at Marie.

Henrietta had to rest a hand on his shoulder to settle him. “Calm yourself, darling,” she spoke softly. “Linus is in England, and the nearest physician would take hours to get here. I won’t have you giving yourself apoplexy over a foolish girl.”

Marie sank into herself at the steadily-delivered scolding from Henrietta. All the shouting and gesticulating that Fergus could summon up wasn’t half as devastating as the quiet barb and disapproving look from Lady Henrietta. Marie grasped her hands in front of her, peeking to the side, where her three sisters stood, watching her have her head ripped off for her indiscretions with Christian the day before.

“It’s not as though anything actually happened,” she defended herself with as much backbone as she dared, which wasn’t much.

Fergus, who was trying to breathe evenly, nearly leapt out of his wheelchair. “Not as though anything happened?” For a moment, Marie was afraid his good eye would pop right out of its socket. “You were seen canoodling with Lord Kilrea’s son on the beach, *and the son in question was naked.*”

Marie flinched as he shouted the last part of the accusation so loudly she feared he would damage his voice. She wanted to grin and smirk over her memory of Christian’s glorious form. The man had nothing to be ashamed of, and indeed, she wasn’t ashamed of a single thing. In spite of every rule of propriety that had ever been thrown in her face and her brother’s rage over the whole thing, she rather admired Christian for his fearlessness. And for his stunning form.

“Well-bred ladies do *not* converse with naked gentlemen on beaches,” Fergus shouted on. “I don’t know where you got it in your head to behave so wickedly. You shouldn’t even know about such things. The sight of a man’s body should make you faint in terror at the very least.”

Marie let out a heavy sigh and rolled her eyes. “Really, Fergus. This is not the Middle Ages. We’re almost in the twentieth century. Women are not ignorant ninnies anymore who need table legs covered for fear of—”

“You are my sister, and you have a level of respectability to maintain because of it,” Fergus silenced her.

“But, Fergus—” Marie snapped her mouth shut and lowered her head slightly when it looked as though her brother might regain every bit of his power of movement through sheer willpower for the express purpose of lunging at her to wring her neck.

“How could you possibly think in a thousand years that even one moment of what you did yesterday was anything

close to appropriate?” Fergus went on. One of Marie’s sisters made a sound, and Fergus jerked to glare at them. “And don’t think the rest of you are safe from the same sort of censure.” He pointed at each of them in turn. “You’re all as bad as the next. I should have heeded the letters Lady Coyle has been sending me for years and come home to dispose of you all much sooner.”

Marie had the uncomfortable feeling that by “dispose” her brother meant in shallow, unmarked graves and not through matrimony.

“Mr. Darrow was bathing in the ocean.” Marie tried one last effort to diffuse the situation. “He was the one who stood up and walked toward me on the beach.”

“And you should have turned and fled,” Fergus roared, not even slightly appeased, “not fallen into conversation with the man while all his bits were hanging.”

It took a supreme effort of will for Marie not to snort at the remembered image of those hanging bits. Or the dark thatch of curls that surrounded them, or the firm plane of Christian’s stomach, his strong muscles, or his sun-kissed skin glittering with saltwater as he—

“So help me God, Marie, if that smirk is an indication of you remembering what you saw, I will lock you away in the tiniest broom closet this castle has and keep you there until you’re old and shriveled,” Fergus growled.

“I was not imagining anything,” Marie lied, her face heating.

“I don’t believe you for a moment,” Fergus said. “I knew you were a saucy strumpet, but I had no idea you would go this far to fling the laws of man and of nature out the window.”

“I did no such thing,” Marie argued with sudden force. She planted her fists on her hips and took a step toward her brother. “I was polite to Mr. Darrow, and yes, we had a bit of fun that some people would see as inappropriate. But it’s not as though I stripped my own clothes off and flung myself at him.” Though she had to admit that patting his bum while pretending he was a selkie might have crossed a line or two. It was such a nice bum, though—firm and warm and the perfect handful. She wouldn’t have minded exploring much more of Christian’s exquisite body. For scientific purposes, of course.

Fergus wasn’t amused by her argument. “You’re only lucky that his cousin, John, back in England is a close friend of mine. Otherwise, I would challenge the lecherous blackguard to pistols at dawn.”

“Fergus.” Marie rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. “No one duels anymore, and even if they did, you’re in no—” She stopped herself short at the flash of hurt in her brother’s eyes. The attack had happened years ago, but no one in the family had truly talked about it since then. A lump formed in Marie’s throat at the sudden knowledge of what her brother had lost and how much it still hurt him.

She cleared her throat and went on while Fergus was still stung. “I like Mr. Darrow. He’s jolly and free. I could see right away that he’s a man who knows how to have fun. That’s all we did. We had fun pretending to some old woman passing by that he was a selkie that had washed up on the shore.”

Fergus glared at her, still red with fury.

“Yes, it was childish,” Marie went on. “But what is life if we cannot embrace simple, childish joys now and then?”

“You are not a child,” Fergus growled.

“No, I’m not. But I’m still capable of joy. We all are, but those rules of society that you seem so intent to embrace would have us all turn into grey automatons the moment we leave the schoolroom. Why is it so very wrong for me to live a life that makes me smile and laugh? And who deemed it inappropriate for me to converse with a man who clearly has no qualms about nudity?”

“Lady Coyle informed us that the two of you were kissing,” Henrietta said, one eyebrow arched as if to call Marie out for her insolence.

Marie winced, her face so hot it felt sunburned. “Yes, well, it was an incidental kiss.”

“An incidental kiss?” Shannon asked off to the side.

Marie peeked at her, suddenly wary that the women she’d been counting on to be her staunchest allies might turn against her as well.

“We were caught up in the moment,” she said. “But don’t you worry. Mr. Darrow was lying prone on the sand at the time, and so was I. There was no embrace and hardly any touching.”

Except their lips. And Marie wasn’t sure she would ever be able to forget the glorious embrace of their lips and tongues. Christian had tasted of salt and excitement. Even with his arms around her only a bit, she’d felt enveloped by him. She wasn’t naïve enough to think her feelings were anything other than lust and an awakening of the flesh. But then again, she hadn’t felt anything close to the stirrings Christian had given her when she’d stolen a kiss from one of the pub owners they’d sold beer to, or that handsome farmer who had offered her a nosegay in exchange for a kiss, or the footman her father had

summarily dismissed after catching the two of them snogging when she was fourteen.

She shook her head to clear away the thoughts. “It was just a kiss,” she said. “It was fun and enjoyable, just as life should be.” She nodded as if to emphasize her point.

“If it’s kissing and enjoyment you want, then you’re in luck,” Fergus said with a scowl that sent a chill down Marie’s back. “The reason we didn’t have this little talk yesterday afternoon is because I was making arrangements, based on Lady Coyle’s advice.”

“Arrangements?” Marie’s voice shook at the thought.

Fergus broke into a grin that made him look downright piratical with his eyepatch. “Congratulations, dear sister,” he said. “You’re engaged to be married.”

“I’m—how—what?” Marie gawped at him.

“I settled the deal yesterday,” Fergus said. “Before word of any of this could get out. You want to play the siren? Well, go ahead. I’m sure your new husband will be glad of it. And with any luck, you’ll be with child by the end of the summer, and you’ll have a wee babe to calm you down by this time next year.”

“Fergus, that’s—” Marie shook with rage, balling her hands into fists at her sides. “That is the cruelest, most underhanded, most vile, heartless, wicked—” Marie ran out of words strong enough to spit at her brother. Her eyes stung with anger at being bartered away like so much baggage. “I will never forgive you for—”

“Fetch your hat and meet me outside,” Fergus cut her off. “We’re paying a call to Kilrea Manor.”

Marie's mouth hung open, but her words stopped in her throat. Kilrea Manor? Christian's home? Fergus couldn't possibly have engaged her to Christian himself that quickly, could he?

But it made sense. Christian was the one she'd committed the impropriety with. It only made sense that their families would want the two of them married off as quickly as possible after that sort of a scene. And if she were honest with herself, after seeing what she stood to gain as Christian's wife—all of it—she had to admit there were worse things that could have happened.

"This isn't fair," she said all the same, rocking back and pretending she was still angry when, in fact, her heart was racing for another reason. "This absolutely isn't fair."

"Neither is life," Fergus said, still looking like the Devil himself. "Go get your things."

Marie tilted her chin up with a sniff and stomped out of the room, but the moment she was in the hall, she broke into a run, grinning from ear to ear.

"YOU, SIR, ARE A COMPLETE DISGRACE," CHRISTIAN'S FATHER snapped, his face contorted in a grimace that proved the intensity of his words. "Have you no respect for this family or our good name?"

Christian let out an impatient breath as he watched his father pace the length of his study in front of him. "I have a great deal of respect for this family," he argued. "But I also know my place in it." A place his father had made sure he knew from the time he was a boy. An inferior place.

His father wheeled around at the end of the room and glared at him with wide eyes. “Your place in it?” He turned an incredulous look to Christian’s older brother, Miles, who stood by the side of their father’s huge, mahogany desk with a smug look. “Do you hear this?”

“Shameful.” Miles sneered, looking as smug as always. “But then, I wouldn’t expect anything more from a reprobate and exhibitionist like Christian.”

“Just because I am comfortable in my own skin does not make me either an exhibitionist or a reprobate,” Christian argued. Though he had a few university chums in Italy who would probably argue the point. His record for going without clothes was four days, and a lovely four days they were.

“You would never be comfortable with anything ever again if I had my way,” his father bellowed, pacing back toward Christian, eyes wide. “I sent you off to Cambridge to learn more than just classics and the law, young man. I sent you there to learn your place in the hierarchy of man.”

“And I learned it,” Christian argued. He gripped his hands behind his back so hard that he would likely bruise his own knuckles. “I learned that there is little for the second son of a middling earl to do with himself.” And he’d learned that he would never, ever be anything but an afterthought in his father’s eyes. A distasteful afterthought at that. So what harm was there in him enjoying life, since he would never meet his father’s exacting standards?

“You could join the army,” Miles suggested with a smirk, as if he knew exactly how well that would turn out. “Or take up the cloth,” he went on, unable to keep himself from laughing at the ridiculousness of the notion.

Christian sent him a flat look, hoping the idiot knew he wasn't helping. "I will gladly return to Europe," he said, glancing back to his father. "If you provide me with the financing. Because as I have also discovered, there is very little that a second son can do to earn his own income when he isn't permitted any sort of employment and his allowance is a pittance."

"Are you complaining about my generosity, boy?" his father shouted.

"No, Father, I'm not." Christian let out a breath, his shoulders sinking.

He really wasn't complaining. His father offered him more than enough to live comfortably in a small way. He wouldn't have minded living a small life either, except that he craved company. And as a member of the aristocracy, the company he was supposed to keep lived in a way that required a level of income just out of his reach.

"You know, you could always give me something to do," he said, following the line of his father's pacing with his eyes. "Something with the managing of the estate. What's this I hear about a dispute over fresh water and property boundaries between us and Ned Woodlea's estate?"

"The property dispute with Lord Garvagh is none of your damn business, boy," his father snapped.

Christian flinched back at the vehemence of his father's statement, raising his hands as if to appease the man. "I was merely hoping to find some sort of employment that might be of help to this family that you think I should prize and respect more than I do."

“Ah ha! So you admit that you don’t respect it?” Miles said with a victorious leer.

“I said no such thing,” Christian defended himself, even though it felt pointless. As the oldest son and heir to the earldom, Miles had always been an arrogant prick. He’d tortured Christian mercilessly all through their childhoods, letting Christian know exactly where he stood, both in terms of rank and with their father’s affections. Indeed, even though Christian always had the sense that he was never enough for his father, he’d never truly shaken his desire to try to please the man and earn his love at last.

“Just...just tell me what I can do to make up for this sin in your eyes,” he said, his heart sinking. He didn’t think anything he’d done came close to being a sin. Lady Marie certainly hadn’t been offended. Far from it, she’d been a delight. He’d fallen asleep with the memory of her laughter ringing in his ears the night before and the flash of her green eyes tickling every bit of his remembrance. So much so that he couldn’t resist frigging himself senseless as he imagined a different way their encounter might have turned out. But those thoughts were the last thing he wanted his father to have so much as a hint of.

“You can behave yourself and do as you’re told,” his father said, coming to a stop in front of him with a sharp glower. “That begins with marrying.”

A light of hope blossomed in Christian’s chest. “You want me to marry?” he asked.

Instantly, he thought of Lady Marie. She was the daughter of an earl, after all, and his social equal. Granted, he’d only just made her acquaintance, but if he was being forced into matrimony, why not marry the woman who had sparked his

imagination in such a delightful way? There had certainly been enough of an initial spark between them to suggest that they might be a brilliant match. The more he considered it, the more he was in favor of the idea.

“All right, Father,” he said with a shrug, feeling as though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. “I’ll marry. In fact, I have a woman in mind who—”

“I’ve already arranged a marriage for you,” his father cut him off.

“Arranged?” Frustration burned where hope had been inside of Christian a second before.

His father glanced at his pocket watch. “In fact, she and her brother should be here now. Come along.”

His father turned sharply and gestured to Miles. The two of them started out of the room, leaving Christian stunned in their wake. He leapt into motion after them, his heart lifting again. His father had arranged for him to marry, and the woman was there with her brother now? Marie had a brother. Fergus O’Shea was responsible for his sisters. It couldn’t possibly be that his father had done something he might actually approve of, could it?

He marched down the hall from his father’s study to the morning parlor, his heart lifting with each step. It swelled near to the point of bursting as the three of them walked into the room to find his mother already hosting what looked like a delightful tea party.

And there she was. Lady Marie looked like a dream in light green silk, her ginger hair pulled up in the latest style. Her cheeks were pink with excitement, and her eyes flashed with good humor as she sat beside his mother on the settee,

entertaining her with what must have been a cheeky story, judging by his mother's amusement. There were two other people in the room, a lady and a gentleman, but Christian only had eyes for Marie. Everything was going to turn out the way it should after all.

"Ah, there you are," his mother said, rising from her seat with a smile. "I've just been listening to the most delightful story from your fiancée, Miles."

At first, Christian didn't think he'd heard right. Marie glanced in his direction, their eyes met, and it was as if the rest of the world disappeared for a moment. Even though several yards separated them, Christian felt the same rush of excitement and rightness that he'd felt the morning before, as he and Marie had played their prank on the hapless old woman. Yes, he could marry Marie. He could easily marry her. And the two of them would be happy together and—

"I'm sorry." He shook his head and dragged his eyes away from Marie to frown at his mother. "Did you say *Miles*?"

"Yes, you dolt," Miles said, shifting to stand by Christian's side with a superior smirk. "We're both getting married."

Christian's pulse kicked up as he glanced from his smug brother to his father, then on to his mother, and finally, Marie. "We are?" His voice sounded far away in his own ears.

"Yes, and what a happy day it is," his mother said. "Lord Ballymena here has agreed to have his sister, Lady Marie, marry Miles, and Lord Boleran has graciously given over the hand of his darling sister, Lady Aoife to you, Christian."

Christian's jaw dropped as his mother gestured to a pale, rather mousy-looking young woman with downcast eyes who looked as though she didn't have enough spark within her to

light a match. The hopes that had towered so high within him moments before came crashing down.

Four



Marie gasped so hard at Lady Kilrea's revelation of who was engaged to whom that she instantly burst into a fit of coughing. She couldn't believe it. She simply couldn't believe it. But more immediately, she couldn't catch her breath.

"Good heavens, my dear, are you well?" Lady Kilrea asked, resting a maternal hand on Marie's back.

The gesture was pure and sweet, which only twisted Marie's heart in her chest and prolonged her fit. "I'm fine," she managed to croak as Lady Kilrea gestured for Lady Aoife to fetch Marie's teacup from the low table in front of the settee.

"Here you go, Lady Marie. A spot of tea will make everything well again." Lady Kilrea handed her the teacup with a worried look in her eyes. Not just a worried look, a shrewd one. The older woman glanced from Marie to Christian for a moment before focusing on helping Marie steady herself. "It must be a shock to learn you will be a countess someday."

A thousand different emotions ricocheted through Marie. Shock was indeed one of them, but it had nothing to do with her becoming a countess. She swallowed a second mouthful of tea and did her best to smile gratefully at Lady Aoife.

Lady Aoife, who looked like a porcelain doll that had been left at the back of the shelf. One that hadn't been painted vividly enough to catch anyone's interest. Lady Aoife, who could barely lift her eyes to make certain Marie wasn't choking to death, who had turned scarlet when it was announced she was betrothed to Christian. Lady Aoife, who damn well wasn't going to marry Christian Darrow if Marie had anything to say about it.

The trouble was, she *couldn't* say anything about it. Not when Fergus and Lord Kilrea were so busy congratulating themselves at the side of the gathering. Worse still, Lord Kilrea looked down at Fergus as though he were a leper and not just a man who had lost an eye and the use of his legs in a scurrilous attack. Marie wasn't sure which she hated more, the betrayal that had been hoisted on her or Lord Kilrea's condescension.

"Father, perhaps we could discuss these marital arrangements?" Christian asked into the relative silence that had followed the announcement.

"Yes, a discussion would be grand," Marie managed to croak after swallowing another mouthful of tea. She glared at Fergus as though she could bore a hole through her brother's head.

Lord Kilrea looked surprised at the hint of mutiny. "I see nothing to discuss," he said with a shrug. The way he looked at Christian was almost as harsh as the glare Fergus had for Marie. "There is a necessity of marriage. For both my sons. Suitable brides became available. What more is needed?"

"Suitable brides?" Marie said, teetering on the verge of exploding. The only thing that kept her from going off was Lady Kilrea's maternal presence at her side.

“James,” she hissed at her husband. “There is no need to diminish the importance of these lovely ladies by referring to them merely as brides. As though they were chattel.” She sniffed and shook her head, then smiled broadly at Marie. She turned that smile to Lady Aoife as well. “Soon they will be more than brides, they will be daughters-in-law.”

A whole different kind of misery flooded Marie. It didn't take much of a stretch of the imagination to see that Lady Kilrea was lonely. Perhaps for female company in particular. The hope that shone in her eyes was devastating. And it looked rather like the mischief that had shone in Christian's eyes the day before. In fact, Marie could see that Christian favored his mother in looks and temperament, whereas his brother, Miles, took after their father.

Christian's brother Miles. To whom she was now engaged, thanks to Fergus's shenanigans.

“Fergus, dear brother,” Marie said through clenched teeth, stepping away from Lady Kilrea as gently as she could. “Might I have a word with you?”

“I thought you might want to,” Fergus said, the gleam of an impending fight in his one eye.

Henrietta stood by, of course, and as Marie stepped toward them, she shifted behind Fergus's chair and wheeled him to the far corner of the room.

As soon as the three of them were alone, Marie stood as close as she dared to Fergus's chair and leaned over him to hiss, “Of all the slimy, underhanded, miserable tricks.”

“I told you I had arranged a marriage for you to keep you out of trouble,” Fergus said, radiating anger.

“You could have engaged me to Mr. Darrow,” Marie managed to push out, trembling with fury. “He was the one whose actions you found so objectionable and ruinous in the first place.”

Fergus had to lean back in his chair to glare up at her. “Oh, so you think you should be *rewarded* for behaving like a hussy, do you?”

Marie bristled, eyes going wide. “You intend to punish me for life by shackling me to Lord...Lord...I don’t even know the man’s proper title?” she seethed.

“Lord Agivey is a perfectly decent fellow,” Fergus growled in return. “And he’s set to inherit the title. Most sisters would be falling all over their brothers in thanks right about now.”

“I will not thank you for engaging me to a man that I can see at once I could not possibly ever love,” Marie snapped, alarmed to find herself on the edge of tears.

“Whereas you think you could love Mr. Darrow,” Henrietta filled in the rest of her thought. At least Henrietta had a shred of compassion in her eyes.

Marie wanted to reply, but she feared if she opened her mouth, anything that came out of it would issue forth as a howl.

“Lord Boleran beat me to it,” Fergus admitted in a low voice. “By a matter of hours, I might add.”

“What?” Marie squeaked.

She glanced briefly over her shoulder to where Lord Boleran and Lady Aoife were now in conversation with Christian, his father, and his brother, Marie’s wretched fiancé. Christian wore an irritated flush, but was attempting to speak

politely to Lady Aoife and Lord Boleran both. He happened to look in her direction, and when their eyes met, Marie could feel the strength of his frustration in her bones. She had a feeling Christian could sense the depths of her irritation as well.

Fergus's sigh drew her attention back to her own conversation. "I came here yesterday, fully intending to marry you off to that bounder, Darrow," he said. "But as I was coming in, Boleran was just leaving. For whatever reason, he needed to marry his sister off in a hurry."

Marie blinked, glanced across to Lady Aoife, and frowned. She studied the bland wisp of a woman for a second before frowning at Fergus again. "She's not, you know, in the family way, is she?"

"I doubt it, by the looks of her," Fergus said. "And there was no chance of me asking Boleran right out."

"But really, the only reason a brother has to marry off his sister in a hurry is if she has compromised herself in some way," Henrietta said, staring pointedly at Marie.

"I did not compromise myself," Marie whispered tightly. Guilt lashed her a moment later, so she added, "Not *that* way, at least."

"It hardly matters now," Fergus said. "You made your choices and I've made mine. To save us all from disgrace and ruination, you're marrying Lord Agivey."

"I don't like the look of him," Marie grumbled. She was being sullen and petulant, she would admit as much, even though it stung her pride. But this wasn't a hand of cards or a waltz at some ball they were talking about. This was her life, her future.

She stole another look over her shoulder at Christian. He clearly wasn't any happier about the situation than she was. But once again, Marie caught sight of Lady Kilrea and the pure joy in the woman's eyes as she joined the conversation with Lady Aoife. Misery ate a hole in Marie's chest.

"I'm not sure I'll ever be able to forgive you for this, Fergus," she said in a dangerously hollow voice.

Fergus and Henrietta exchanged a wary look.

"Perhaps this whole plot was entered into with a bit too much haste," Henrietta said. "Marie likes Mr. Darrow, not his brother."

"There's nothing I can do about it," Fergus argued. "The agreement has already been made."

"How many times have I told you not to enter into business dealings while angry, darling?" Henrietta scolded Fergus.

"Undo it," Marie said, balling her hands into fists at her sides. "I don't care what it costs you, undo the betrothal this instant."

"And if that is even possible?" Fergus stared up at her, his one eye sharp. "I suppose you want me to convince Lord Boleran to undo his sister's engagement to your Mr. Darrow as well?"

Marie winced. "Lord Boleran is a marquess. You're just an earl. Surely, Lord Kilrea would want his eldest son and heir to marry the sister of a marquess instead of an earl's wicked sister."

"Kilrea was a little too intrigued by my English connections," Fergus said with a frown. "Not to mention

Henrietta's connections. Boleran might be a marquess, but he doesn't have the connections I do."

"Dammit." Marie stomped her foot, feeling far too boxed in by the machinations of an aristocracy she had never had the time of day for.

Her tiny outburst caught the attention of everyone at the other end of the room. Lady Kilrea's face pinched with regret, which spilled even more guilt through Marie. Lady Aoife kept her head down, of course, but Lord Boleran and Lord Agivey frowned in disapproval. The sight of her fiancé's frown sent dread pooling in Marie's stomach. That was what she had to look forward to?

Christian's expression was the only one that hardened into a sense of purpose. But when he attempted to step away from his group and head across the room to Marie's, his father caught his arm and jerked him to a stop. Christian remained off-balance for the amount of time it took for his father to whisper something to him. After that, Christian's expression flattened and he stood straighter, turning back to the conversation in front of him.

Not that there was much conversation after the awkward interruption.

"Well, isn't this a fine kettle of fish," Marie said, shaking her head in annoyance and stepping away from her brother and sister-in-law. She couldn't think of anything to do in the moment to get out of the horrific situation. The only thing she could do was to gather more information so she could figure out a way to save her skin.

That meant putting on a polite smile and returning to Lady Kilrea's side. Her potential future mother-in-law was the only

bright spot in the muddle, so she would focus her efforts there to start.

“You must be so pleased to have daughters-in-law on the horizon, my lady,” Marie opened the conversation with the woman. She reluctantly included Lady Aoife in the small circle they made adjacent to the conversation the men carried on with. Henrietta wheeled Fergus into that conversation, then joined the women herself.

“I am,” Lady Kilrea said, placing a hand on her chest and glancing fondly from Marie to Lady Aoife. “I have had so little female companionship in my day, you see.”

“Oh? Do you not have sisters?” Henrietta asked.

“Alas, I had a younger sister, Evelyn,” Lady Kilrea sighed. “She was a year younger than me, but the poor thing died of a fever when she was ten.” The tragedy had clearly happened decades ago, but Lady Kilrea teared up all the same. “And I have given birth to two beautiful baby girls in my time,” she went on. “Sadly, neither of them made it out of the cradle.” She glanced between Marie and Lady Aoife again. “They would be about your ages now, I believe.”

Marie wanted to burst into tears herself at the revelation. She wanted to throw back her head and wail. Lady Kilrea was far too precious and much too fragile for her to callously throw over her son. She couldn’t possibly deny the woman the love that she must have felt she’d been missing her whole life. Even though it meant she was about to enter a prison that she would never be able to escape.

A prison that would be made a thousand times worse by the proximity it would bring her to Christian. She glanced to the side, finding Christian staring at her with his lips pressed shut and anger in his eyes. Marie felt that anger in her soul. It

was bloody well unfair of the fates and their male relatives to ruin their lives before they'd even had a chance to begin. And yes, she was fully aware of the reality that she had only just met Christian. It was impossible for her to have developed feelings for him worth building a lifetime on after one encounter, no matter how jolly and...and naked that encounter had been. But that didn't stop her from wanting to scream over the whole thing.

"It's only right that Miles marry first," Lady Kilrea said, pulling Marie's attention back to the matter at hand. "He is the eldest, after all. And I believe my husband is in something of a hurry to have the wedding. You wouldn't mind if it was held in September, would you, my dear?"

Marie smiled, in spite of the fact that she wanted to weep. "Not at all, my lady."

Lady Kilrea beamed, then turned to Lady Aoife. "And yours shall be a Christmas wedding. Won't that be grand?"

"Lovely, my lady," Lady Aoife muttered, eyes downcast and cheeks pink.

"What's this I hear about a September and a Christmas wedding?" Lord Kilrea asked. He managed to subtly maneuver them all so that they formed one large conversation.

"Are we certain September is soon enough?" Lord Agivey asked, leering at Marie.

Christian looked as though he wanted to throttle his brother.

"We'll have a party to announce the engagements immediately," Lord Kilrea said. "An engagement party is as good as a wedding in some circles." He laughed proudly, as though he'd accomplished a coup.

“Will the engagement party happen here?” Fergus asked. “Or would you rather have it at Dunegard Castle?”

“Oh, at the castle, of course.” Lord Kilrea’s eyes shone, as though the mere thought of being seen hosting a party at a castle would raise his standing in Ireland and England both.

Fergus sent Henrietta a look as though the two of them knew precisely what the man was thinking. Marie would have joined in, but the reality of having a party planned for her engagement to a man who had yet to actually speak to her directly had chased any hope of seeing humor in the situation right out of her. She peeked desperately at Christian. He felt like her only ally in the dire situation.

“Excuse me, Father,” Christian said, glancing away from Marie. “Could I have a word with Lord Boleran?”

“Yes, of course,” Lord Kilrea said with a slight frown.

Marie frowned as well. As Christian stepped away with Lord Boleran, she felt as though she’d lost her last ally. Only when Christian sent a short look back over his shoulder to her, a hint of mischief in his eyes, did Marie consider that he was up to something. Perhaps his efforts to break away from the group at large had nothing to do with speaking to his fiancée’s brother—dear God, that was what Lord Boleran was to him now—and more to do with getting away from his father. If that were the case, she needed to find a way out as well.

“Excuse me, my lady,” she said, leaning close to Lady Kilrea’s ear. “Could I make use of your retiring room?”

Lady Kilrea blinked at her for a moment, then seemed to understand. “Yes, yes, of course.” She waved to one of the maids—who were standing at the ready around the perimeter

of the room. “Laura, please show Lady Marie to the facilities,” she asked one of the maids in a hush.

It was all a lot of fuss to get Marie out of the room, but she didn’t care. As soon as the maid led her down the hall to the water closet, Marie thanked the girl, then pretended to go about her business, shutting herself in the tiny room. A scant few seconds later, she popped her head back out into the hall. If she’d guessed correctly, Christian would slip out of the parlor as well.

She was right. Her heart sang with joy and mischief as Christian stepped into the hall. He saw her head peeking out from the door and broke into a wide grin, picking up his pace. Within seconds, he’d slipped into the water closet with her.

“I’d say we’re in a bit of a tight situation,” Marie whispered as the two of them squeezed into the small space. The water closet was bigger than a bedroom closet, but not by much. On top of that, it was jammed with modern plumbing. The space had obviously been carved into the existing structure of a house that had been designed before the invention of indoor plumbing, but it had been designed poorly.

Not that Marie was in the mood to complain about the necessity of wedging herself closer to Christian at the moment.

“This is more than a tight situation,” Christian said, his expression seeming to have a hard time deciding whether to be jolly or morose. “This is an emergency.”

“I could strangle my brother for pushing me off on your brother this way,” Marie said, moving her arms restlessly, not sure where to put them.

Christian settled the matter for her by grasping her hands and holding them between their bodies. “And I had no idea

who Lady Aoife was, let alone that my father thought she'd be a suitable match."

"Did you learn anything from her brother just now?" Marie asked, hope rising in her. "Why he's in such a rush to marry off his sister?"

"No," Christian said with a sigh. "Only that he's adamant his sister marry as soon as possible. Which is highly suspicious, if you ask me."

"Definitely suspicious," Marie echoed. "Why anyone would need to marry in such a rush is beyond me."

Christian's eyes suddenly danced with mischief and delight. Marie found herself uncommonly aware of the closeness of the water closet and how necessary it was for them to stand almost flush against each other.

"I'm not opposed to the idea of marriage in general, you know," Christian said, the warmth in his eyes growing. "It has its uses."

"It certainly does," Marie agreed. The water closet was amazingly warm all of a sudden, and she had the uncanny urge to giggle in spite of the muddle they were in. "I wouldn't mind marrying myself," she went on. "Provided I was allowed to choose my groom."

"My feelings precisely." Christian nodded. "That is to say, marriage isn't something I had even thought to contemplate at this stage of my life, but if I were in the market for a wife—"

"And if I felt as though now were the right time in my life —" Marie added.

"Who is to say what exciting and vivacious bride I might choose?"

“I might be persuaded to shackle myself to someone who keeps me on my toes,” Marie agreed.

“If it was an absolute necessity,” Christian said.

“If it were a requirement that the decision be made immediately,” Marie said.

“I might find it within my power to—”

She lifted to her toes and threw her arms over his shoulders, kissing him with all the daring and desperation she felt. He let out a wild sound of acceptance and relief, kissing her back and wrapping his arms around her the way Marie had wanted him to the day before. It was sheer madness for them to kiss that way, in a water closet located right in the center of his house when both of their families were only rooms away, but Marie didn't care. His body was scintillating against hers, and the emotions and urges his hungry mouth inspired in her were headier than the finest beer.

“Wait,” Christian gasped, breaking their kiss. “This is thoroughly mad, isn't it.”

“That we're kissing in a water closet mere minutes after being engaged against our will to other people?” Marie suggested.

“Yes?” His grin widened. “That and considering we only met yesterday.”

“It is.” Marie nodded, staring at his kiss-reddened lips. “It's completely mad.” She launched into him again, throwing her whole heart into kissing him and exploring him with her tongue.

“Good,” he said between desperate kisses. “I always wanted to do something hair-brained and shocking.”

“I’m sure you’ve done plenty of hair-brained things and will do many more that are twice as shocking,” she cooed as she threaded her fingers through his hair. All her life, she’d been warned about the allure and seduction of the flesh. She’d been told that sensuality was powerful and could lead a woman down a dangerous path in no time. As she kissed Christian, loving every moment of his mouth against hers and his hands exploring her sides, she knew it was true.

“You’re not marrying my brother,” Christian said at last, breathless and alive with energy.

“And you’re not marrying Lady Aoife,” Marie told him. “But how do we stop the weddings?”

“We can start by stopping the engagement party.” Christian had the same mischievous light in his eyes that he’d had when he asked her to play the prank on the old woman the day before.

“Yes,” Marie said. “Whatever wickedness you’re plotting, I say yes.”

“Good.” He kissed her once more, soundly, then leaned back. “I have an idea. I’m sure by the time we get back to the parlor, my father will have set a date for the engagement party. Whatever day that is, I want you to meet me in the carriage house here, at Kilrea Manor.”

“The carriage house?” Marie blinked up at him.

Christian’s grin widened. “They can’t announce our engagement if they never make it to the party.”

Marie sucked in a breath, then let it out in a giggle. “Whatever you’re plotting, it’s brilliant.” She kissed him again, more certain than ever that it was possible to know in an instant when you’d met your match.

Five



Of all the things that Christian learned at university, the most useful was to hope for the best but to plan for the worst. He had a plan to free both himself and Marie from their painfully unsuitable betrothals—a jolly, high-spirited plan at that—but he wasn't the sort to prank his way out of his problems without trying every rational and reasonable means to fix things first.

Luckily for him—and for Marie—the fortnight that followed the revelation of their horrific engagements involved the three families seeing each other on an almost daily basis. That meant he and Marie were able to spend a surprising amount of time together, though none of it spent alone. In a way, Christian didn't mind. Being thrown into crowded social situations with Marie meant that he was able to talk to her, to get to know her better. And he liked everything he learned about her—about how intelligent she actually was and how industrious, about her shockingly modern views of the world, and her good heart. The way she took to his mother, and his mother to her, was even more encouragement for Christian.

By the morning of the engagement party at Dunegard Castle, he was convinced that his initial impressions of Marie as being the perfect woman for him in every way were correct.

Which meant he wasn't going to stand by and watch both Marie and himself be treated like pawns in a chess game.

"Surely, Father, you must see that Miles and Lady Marie have nothing at all in common," he argued while pacing his father's office hours before the family was due to leave Kilrea Manor for the party. "Miles has barely spoken two words to her since you announced the engagement."

"I have nothing to say to her," Miles argued without glancing up at Christian. He leaned against his father's desk, inspecting his nails—which had the perfection of a man who hadn't done a lick of manual labor in his life.

"You don't need to say anything to her," their father added without looking up from the papers on his desk.

"That is preposterous." Christian glared at his brother. "One should have a loving, or at least cordial, relationship with one's wife."

"And is that why you've been paying Lady Aoife so much mind?" Miles asked with a sharp smirk.

Christian let out a breath, trying not to let the guilt of largely ignoring the woman he was supposed to marry bother him. He had no intention of ever going through with that marriage, after all. "Lady Aoife is difficult to converse with," he said in a low voice. "She doesn't seem to have any opinions. She's always glancing out the window as though she'd rather be somewhere else."

"At least my fiancée is interested in conversation," Miles snorted, as though he'd scored a point against Christian.

Christian clenched his jaw and glared at his brother. They'd battled for everything from pudding to attention for as long as he could remember. And for what? There were no

rules saying a man had to be close to his brother. The urge to best Miles was still there, though, but before he could tell him off, their father said, “Conversation in a marriage is irrelevant. All you need is a hostess to entertain your company and a womb to bear your heir.”

Christian gaped at his father, disgust welling up in him. “What kind of an antiquated, misogynistic opinion is that?”

The vehemence of his question was enough to startle his father out of the business of the estate spread across his desk. “I beg your pardon?” he seethed.

“Is your head so buried in disputed estate boundaries and cheating our neighbors that you haven’t stopped to realize how important women are in our world?” Christian demanded.

Miles snorted. “They’re important in the bedroom, all right. Although I’d just as soon have a mistress. A wife could never satisfy my particular tastes.”

Christian shook his head, unable to believe what he was hearing. “Women are being admitted to universities now,” he said. “They are entering the workforce in larger numbers than ever before. They own businesses, manage estates. Some even hold public office.”

“No woman with any sort of breeding does anything half so scandalous,” his father huffed, looking genuinely put out. “And no son of mine will speak of such atrocities, let alone champion them.”

“I cannot believe what I am hearing,” Christian said. “I knew your opinions were old-fashioned, Father, but I had no idea they were so backwards.”

“Backwards?” His father snorted with laughter. “This from a rascalion who waltzes about the countryside in his

altogether, leading daughters of the aristocracy astray.”

“I was having fun.” Christian raised his voice. When both his father and Miles sneered, he went on with, “Life is meant to be fun. It is meant to be filled with joy and laughter.”

“It is meant to be filled with diligence, hard work, and the maintenance of proper order,” his father argued.

A strange sort of pain filled Christian. His father and brother would never understand him. He shouldn’t need their understanding or approval, but, damn him, he did. Even if he didn’t have the slightest idea how to gain that approval.

“Life is meant to be happy. Even you deserve to be happy.” He flung out a hand toward Miles. “These marriages you propose will bring about misery. I won’t stand by and let them happen.”

“You have no choice.” His father rose abruptly, leaning forward over his desk and glaring at Christian. “I am your father,” he said, snapping each word. “I rule this family. God has ordained it to be so. You will do as you are told or you will be flung out like so much chaff.”

“You are making a mistake,” Christian countered. “A mistake that will have all of us cursing your name for decades to come.”

“Then curse me.” His father shrugged as though he didn’t care. “Just do as I say.”

Never before had Christian had such a strong urge to strike his own father. The man was blinded by his pride. Worse still, Christian knew the louder he protested the betrothals, the more his father would dig in his heels. It seemed as though reason and logic couldn’t win out against arrogance and cynicism after all.

Too aggravated to say anything more, Christian turned and stormed out of the room. Miles sniggered at him as he went, which only darkened Christian's heart more. If he couldn't talk his and Marie's way out of the betrothals, he would have to resort to pranks after all.

By the time he reached the carriage house, his frustration had coalesced into wicked purpose. It was a long-shot, but if he aggravated his father to the point of madness by making his every living moment a lesson in obstruction, maybe he could convince the man to see things his way.

"You look like sunshine and roses." Marie startled him by pushing away from the carriage house's door and stepping toward him.

A rush of joy cut through the darkness growing inside of Christian and he breathed a sigh of relief. "You remembered," he said, moving toward her and pulling her into his arms.

"How could I forget?" she asked with a saucy smile, sliding her arms over his shoulders and playing with strands of his hair.

Marie made him happy. That was all that mattered. They were completely mad to carry on the way they had, they were risking so much more than just their reputations by encouraging the spark between them, but Christian wouldn't have had it any other way. It settled him so deeply that he risked kissing her right then and there, in the doorway of the carriage house, where anyone might have seen them.

"Delightful," Marie sighed as their kiss ended. A moment later, her eyes widened and her smile grew. "So why did you want me to meet you here, of all places? Are we going to run away together and live the life of vagabonds, traveling the world and constantly running from our families?"

Christian laughed aloud, heart full. “No, but I like that as a secondary idea.” He stepped away from her, taking her hand and leading her deeper into the line of parked carriages housed in the old building. “Is everything still set up for the party at your brother’s house later?” he asked, heading for the carriage his father favored for paying calls. It was a large, black-lacquered thing with the family crest painted on the doors. Granted, all of his father’s carriages were large, black-lacquered things with the crest on the doors, but this one was the largest.

Marie huffed and leaned against the carriage when Christian let go of her hand. “Yes, unfortunately. I’ve begged and pleaded with Fergus to renege on the engagement. I’ve wept and I’ve cajoled. I even told him exactly why I would rather die than marry your brother.”

Christian glanced over his shoulder at her as he fetched the box of tools for maintaining the carriages from one of the shelves at the side of the room. “And why would you rather die than marry my brother?” he asked with a teasing grin.

Marie’s answering look—wicked as the day was long—made Christian’s heart swell. It made other things swell as well. That gave him ideas far beyond the initial prank he had in store.

“I think you know what my reasons are,” she said, flickering one eyebrow at him as he returned to the carriage.

He laughed, then dropped to squat and stare at the underside of the carriage. “If you continue to look at me like that, Lady Marie, you’ll put notions into my head that would make even the sauciest of souls blush.”

“I certainly hope so,” she hummed. A pause followed, then she asked in a far more serious voice, “What are you doing?”

“Putting my plan in motion,” Christian said, taking a wrench from the toolbox and going to work on the bolts that held the carriage’s axle together.

Marie squatted by his side, her eyes round as she watched him work. “Good Lord. If you do that, the wheels will fall off.”

“That is the general idea.” Christian sent her a naughty wink.

Marie clapped a hand over her mouth to hide her giggle. “I knew you were impish,” she said a moment later, “but I had no idea you were downright bad.”

“I’m clever,” he said, loosening another bolt, then leaning closer to Marie, flickering one eyebrow. “But I can be bad, if that’s what you want me to be.”

Marie’s answering laugh shot straight to his groin as he went back to work, loosening bolts. “But how do you know this is the carriage your father will take to the party?” she asked, following him around the carriage as he worked.

“This is his favorite,” Christian reasoned. “And I’m not disabling it outright. If I’ve calculated correctly, the carriage will hold together long enough to get them away from the house before the wheels fall off. That way, they’ll be forced to walk back here to fetch another carriage. With any luck, they’ll give up entirely and call the whole party off.”

“What a delightfully mad-capped plan,” Marie asked. “I hope it works.”

“It will,” he promised her with a deep earnestness. “You won’t have to marry Miles, I swear.”

IT WAS MAD, BUT CHRISTIAN DISABLING HIS FATHER'S carriage might have been the sweetest thing anyone had ever done for Marie. She asked Christian questions about his experience with carriages as he finished loosening bolts underneath the thing, then stood to replace the tools and wipe his hands.

"I never was one to stand idly by and let other people solve my problems," he explained once he was done, as the two of them headed outside to where Marie had left her bicycle. "When I was traveling with my friends in Europe after university, I found it necessary to repair the carriage we'd hired on a regular basis. As it turns out, that was a useful skill to have."

"So, if your father tosses you out on your ear for defying him, you'll be able to find work as a mechanic," Marie said with a wry grin.

"I will never want for anything," Christian replied with mock seriousness.

Marie laughed, and her heart felt light. In the last fortnight, Fergus had insisted she spend as much time with the Darrow family as possible, ostensibly to get to know her fiancé better. Fergus foolishly believed that if Marie liked one brother, she would like the other as well. But Miles was nothing like Christian, and Christian was the most magnificent man she'd ever met. The days they'd spent together, even though they hadn't been alone, had confirmed every initial feeling she'd had for the man. She'd be damned if she married anyone but Christian Darrow.

"What do we do now?" she asked grabbing the handlebars of her bicycle and walking it around so that it pointed toward

the drive leading away from the carriage house and stables. “The party isn’t for several hours.”

Christian swayed closer to her, even though the bicycle stood between them. “We’ll just have to find something to occupy ourselves,” he said with a look of such mischief that Marie’s insides threatened to turn to jelly. Christian wasn’t just handsome and clever, he made her want to throw every bit of caution and propriety to the wind so that she could explore all the things that were supposed to be forbidden with him.

“We could go for a bicycle ride,” she suggested. “If you owned a bicycle.”

“I don’t,” he said, deflating. A moment later, he brightened all over again. “But we could try something I saw some of the girls in Southern France do with their beaux.”

Something about the sentence sent a giddy thrill through Marie’s gut. “I think I would rather enjoy attempting things that girls in Southern France do with their beaux.”

Christian’s eyes heated, as though he knew exactly what she meant. “Come on, then.”

He reached for her hand—or rather, he took the handlebars of the bicycle from her. Before Marie could figure out what he was doing, he’d mounted the bicycle and was ready to ride.

“You can ride on the handlebars,” he said with a wink.

Marie’s jaw dropped, and a spike of genuine worry twisted around her gut. “Really? Is that even possible?”

“Like I said, girls in France do it all the time,” Christian said.

“And I won’t be outdone by girls in France,” Marie said, mostly to herself.

It took a few tries for her to figure out how to climb up onto the handlebars. Christian helped her, but then they had to spend a few minutes figuring out how to tuck her skirts in so that they wouldn't catch in the wheels. After a few false starts, they coordinated their actions enough for Christian to pedal the bicycle forward with Marie as a passenger.

Once they got the hang of things, Christian picked up speed as they sailed away from Kilrea Manor and onto the road. Marie was dreadfully uncomfortable with the solid handlebar wedged against her unmentionable bits. The wind threatened to rip her hat clean off her head, so she had to hold it with one hand and grip any part of the bicycle she could reach for dear life with her other hand. But they managed to keep their balance as they shot off into the green countryside.

"Where are we going?" Christian shouted over the wind as they rolled along at a speed that had Marie's heart in her throat.

She thought fast, glancing around as best she could. All she wanted to do was spend time with Christian. Alone. That would never happen if they went on to Dunegard Castle, or even into one of the towns and villages nearby. There was really only one option.

"To the cottage," she said over her shoulder as best she could without losing her balance.

"The cottage?" Christian asked.

"You'll see."

She directed him along the road, telling him when to turn and which way to go. The ride was made extra thrilling, knowing they were headed somewhere they truly shouldn't have been, and that they would be there alone. All the same,

Marie was grateful to see her home for the last few years peek out from around the corner as they neared the cliff where it was perched. She and her sisters had left the place less than a month before, and even though Fergus had forbidden it, they had all been checking in on their home to make sure it was in good order.

“This place is lovely,” Christian said, glancing around after Marie hopped off the bicycle—or rather, stumbled clumsily and nearly ended up splayed in the grass. “And you say you used to live here?”

“Up until very recently,” Marie confirmed, pointing to where Christian could prop the bicycle against the side of the house. No other bicycles were there, indicating that her sisters weren’t there either. They were probably all at the castle, preparing for the party. “Fergus made us move back to the house so that he could marry us all off mercilessly.”

“Mercilessly,” Christian repeated teasingly as Marie unlocked the cottage’s front door and led him inside. “It’s a good thing we aren’t going to let that happen,” he said.

“Isn’t it, though?” Marie laughed.

Christian took in the front rooms of the house instead of replying. Everything was the way Marie and her sisters had left it while living there. The kitchen was still set up for brewing beer, which came as no surprise to Marie. She had a sneaking suspicion Shannon had kept their scandalous enterprise going since they’d all moved back to the castle. It was a pleasure to show Christian around the beloved place. Judging by the spark in his eyes, he was impressed by what he saw.

“What a cozy little home,” he said with genuine feeling.

“I love it,” Marie said with a sigh.

“As do I.” Christian glanced to her, his smile growing. “The walls are filled with happiness.”

Marie beamed at the compliment. “They are,” she agreed. “We were always happy here.”

“And did you bring gentlemen to your cozy little home?” he asked, slinking closer to her as they reached the main downstairs parlor.

Marie bit her lip, letting herself slide into his offered embrace. “Not once.” She tilted her head to the side. “Though heaven knows why I didn’t think of that sooner.”

He laughed deep in his throat, and Marie thought she might explode right out of her skin. He followed that with a searing kiss, his mouth slanting over hers and devouring her with tender passion. He was easily the finest kisser Marie had ever known. He made her wish she’d never kissed another man before. Then again, after the way he teased her with his lips and tongue, his hands brushing her sides and caressing her breasts, she didn’t think she would ever be able to remember another man as long as she lived.

“Do you know,” he began in a low purr, “I’ve just had a thought about a practically fool-proof way my father and your brother could be convinced to call off our erstwhile betrothals and let us marry each other.”

Marie sucked in a breath. It was the first time either of them had spoken outright about the possibility of marrying each other. She’d known in her heart it was what she truly wanted, but hearing the words spoken aloud thrilled her beyond measure.

“What way is that?” she asked breathlessly.

He inched back enough to gaze into her eyes with fire. “If I were to thoroughly ruin you, I don’t see how they could say no to our union.”

Marie stared back at him, her blood racing through her veins. “Heavens, Mr. Darrow. Are you actually suggesting whisking me upstairs to my old bedroom and ravishing me?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m suggesting,” he said with a mischievous sparkle in his eyes.

“That would certainly convince everyone to back away from the ill-advised betrothals they’ve thrown us into,” she said, sinking against him. She loved the feeling of his body against hers, and if she wasn’t mistaken, part of his body was already excited by the idea of sneaking upstairs with her.

“Like I said.” He kissed her lightly. “A fool-proof plan.” He kissed her again.

“How could I possibly say no to a fool-proof plan?” Marie asked, grinning from ear to ear. She didn’t wait for him to continue with the banter or ask for some sort of permission. She broke away from him, grabbing his hand, and dashed down the hall to the stairs with him.

Christian’s laughter as they hurried up the stairs went straight to Marie’s head. There was something innocent and almost childlike about the way they took the stairs two at a time, hardly pausing for breath when they reached Marie’s room at the top. As soon as they crossed Marie’s threshold, Christian shut the door behind them with his foot, then yanked Marie into his arms for another kiss. It was absolute joy, unfettered desire, and everything Marie could have hoped for. Whether society approved or not, she had what she wanted in her arms, and, like a child with a toy, she was determined to get the most enjoyment out of the situation that she could.

“I don’t suppose I should ask whether you’re sure about this,” Christian said as Marie peeled his jacket from his shoulders and fumbled with the buttons of his waistcoat.

“Of course not,” she gasped, wriggling so that he had better access to the buttons lining the front of her blouse. “When I know what I want, I know what I want. And I want you.”

“Thank God,” he groaned, taking a moment to wriggle out of his waistcoat, then tug his shirt out of his trousers and off over his head. “Because all I want is you too.”

Marie made a sensual sound of approval in her throat, then spread her hands across his broad chest, loving the feel of his hair against her fingers. He was so perfectly masculine in every way. She felt as though she’d waited a lifetime to explore a man’s body, and nothing felt more perfect than that body belonging to Christian. She couldn’t get enough of touching him, and leaned in to bring her lips to his shoulder and collarbone. He let out a sound of approval, pausing in his clumsy efforts to undress her, and let her kiss and nip at his skin.

“I’m not sure if this is going to be the longest and most amazing experience of my life or if it’ll be over before we’ve truly begun,” he laughed. That laughter caught in his throat and turned into a groan as she reached into his trousers.

She gasped as well, biting her lip as she stroked her hand along his powerful length. She’d seen his penis in the light of day, glittering with sea water and sunshine, and she’d had the barest hint of what it might look like when he was genuinely aroused. Feeling that arousal as it grew and filled him out left her with an aching, restless sensation deep in her core.

“I’m not sure if I care how long it lasts, as long as it happens,” she panted, leaning back to meet his eyes.

Christian laughed, joy and lust radiating from him. “Oh, you’ll mind.”

“Will I?” she asked with a coquettish arch of one eyebrow.

“Believe me,” he said, finishing with the buttons of her blouse and pushing it open. “Once we get going, you’ll want it to last forever.”

“I like the sound of that.” She fumbled with the fastenings of his trousers.

He paused after pulling her blouse from her skirt. “Perhaps not the first time.” He winced. “Have you ever been with a man before?”

“No,” she answered honestly, her heart thudding against her ribs as the gravity of what they were doing hit her.

“Then maybe rushing through things this first time would be best,” he said.

She blinked, hands hovering over the hot hardness beneath his trousers. “Why?”

“The first time might not be that...comfortable,” he warned her.

“Oh, I’ve heard all about that,” Marie laughed. “But if you want to charge through and just get it over with—”

“The last thing I want to do is just get it over with,” he laughed, continuing to undress her.

“Then by all means, take your time.” Marie caught her breath as he reached around to tug at the drawstring holding her skirts in place.

The one thing they didn't take their time doing was undressing. It was far easier for him to shed his clothes—something she had a feeling he did on a regular basis, judging by how fast they dropped off him. She only had a moment to bite her lip and appreciate the pure, male glory of his erection as framed against his lean hips and flat abdomen. Her clothes took far more effort to remove and required her turning her back to him far more than she wanted to.

But at last, they were both as naked as the day they were born. They spilled into Marie's bed, panting and reaching for each other.

"You're beautiful," Christian sighed, stroking his hands across her sides and treating her breasts to feather-light touches. "I'm not sure I'll ever be able to get enough of you."

"If our plot works, you will have all the time in the world to get as much as you'd like," she told him, running her fingers through his hair.

"It still wouldn't be enough." He bent down to capture her mouth, kissing her until her head spun and her body throbbed.

He didn't stop there. As glorious as his kisses were and as much as they enflamed her, it was his hands that made her writhe against him, aching for everything. He caressed her breasts, thumbing her nipples and then pinching them just enough to have her arching off the bed and gasping at the pleasure.

"I don't know how we waited so long for this," Christian panted as his hands traveled down across the flat of her stomach to delve between her legs.

"So long? We've only known each other for—oh!"

She nearly arched off the bed as his fingers stroked the wetness of her sex. She'd pleased herself plenty of times before, but it was nothing to the expert skill of his fingers teasing and arousing her. He didn't hesitate in the slightest, thrusting first one and then two fingers inside of her to test her readiness. She was more than ready from the start, but he worked her into a need that was so desperate she thought she might come out of her skin.

That was only the beginning. With his fingers still thrusting inside of her, he positioned his thumb to rake across her clitoris. Within seconds, Marie came apart in a burst of light and pleasure. She sighed loudly at the sensations that throbbed through her, then realized Christian was groaning with triumph as well. He'd done that to her, and she had never been more overawed in her life.

As if he had a sixth sense for timing, he shifted his body over hers, nudging her thighs open, then thrusting inside of her while she was still transported by the pleasure of her orgasm. He was so quick and decisive that the moment of shock her body experienced at his invasion felt like nothing more than a bump in the road, easily forgotten as the journey continued.

"Oh, Christian," she gasped as he moved inside her. "That's...that's..." She lost the ability to form words entirely and let out a long sigh as she moved with him.

"Marie," he gasped against her ear as his motions sped up.

It was a revelation. Marie gripped his back with her fingertips, wrapping her legs around his hips as he thrust harder and harder, until his whole body tensed and he let out a shattering sound of pleasure. Warmth and affection filled her as he spilled himself deep inside of her. It was the most

amazing sensation she'd ever felt, and in echo of what he'd said earlier, she didn't ever want it to end.

But the hazy contentment that settled over them once it was done was almost as good as the act itself. She'd never felt closer to anyone in her life. Christian pulled out of her and settled at her side, then kissed her with a new, protective kind of affection that made her feel as though the sun had come out after a stormy day. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him back, paying no mind to how sweaty and overheated they both were. There was nothing in the world better than feeling so connected to the man she knew she would move heaven and earth to spend the rest of her life with.

"Are you all right?" Christian managed to squeeze out a few minutes later. "I didn't hurt you much, did I?"

"You didn't hurt me at all," Marie laughed. "You can do that again whenever you'd like."

Christian laughed, snuggling against her side as though he would settle in for a nap. "With any luck, once we explain to our families what we've done, they'll let us continue on like this forever."

Marie hummed in approval at the thought, but she couldn't keep her eyes open. Neither could Christian, apparently. They drifted off into a contented sleep.

Of course, that contentment vanished in a snap when they awoke more than an hour later.

"Thank God I wound the clocks when I stopped by yesterday," Marie said, leaping out of bed and going to check the clock on her mantel to confirm the time. "We're going to be so, so late for our own party."

“If the party happens at all,” Christian laughed, climbing out of bed behind her. Marie took a moment to drink in the sight of him. She could appreciate his naked form even more now, knowing what he was capable of. “Hopefully my little sabotage worked.”

“Hopefully,” Marie repeated.

Half an hour later, they discovered that Christian’s prank had worked, but not as he’d intended. They’d washed and dressed in a hurry, fetched Marie’s bicycle, and sped back along the road to Dunegard Castle. The ride was even more uncomfortable for Marie on the way back than it had been before, but just as she was close to complaining about it, she spotted something in the distance that stopped her words and her breath in her throat.

“Oh, no!” She gestured for Christian to stop the bicycle, and they both dismounted. “No!”

Ahead of them on the road and scattered for several yards to either side were broken and twisted pieces of black-lacquered, splintered wood and twisted metal. Two horses writhed and screamed in the grass as the inhabitants of a second carriage got out to check the wreckage of the first. Along with the carnage of the wrecked carriage, Marie spotted four broken and splayed bodies.

Six



The edges of Christian's vision blurred and his stomach lurched as his mind attempted to adjust to what he was seeing spread out across the road in front of him and Marie. He hardly felt Marie's hand grip his arm or the bicycle beneath him as he stared at the wreck of his father's carriage. For a moment, he was frozen, unable to hear Marie's cry of alarm or the shouts from the people from the second carriage that had stopped behind the wreck. A farmer's wagon was also speeding toward the scene, and the driver of the second carriage ran to meet it. But all Christian could see were the bodies spread through the wreckage.

They were completely still.

He knew in an instant what had happened, knew it and felt he might be crushed by it. An odd, strangled cry sounded somewhere in the distance. Only after he felt it burn in his lungs did he realize that the sound came from him.

"Christian." Marie's voice cut through the thundering heaviness around him.

He turned his head slowly to look at her. Her beautiful face was pinched in horror. That was enough to snap him out of his shock.

He sucked in a breath, scrambling away from the bicycle and Marie. As fast as he could, he dashed toward the wreckage.

“Stand back,” the man who had reached the scene first warned him, holding up a hand.

Christian’s fogged brain was slow to recognize him as Lord Boleran, which was ridiculous. He’d spent the better part of the past fortnight socializing with the man. It was a bad sign that his mind was too fractured to see Boleran as an individual and not just another part of the nightmare unfolding in front of him.

“I mean it, my lord, stand back,” Boleran repeated.

“No.” Christian stumbled forward in spite of Boleran’s efforts to keep him away from what he knew he’d see.

The carriage was utterly destroyed, as though someone had fired a cannon shot into it. Even the metal of the axle had twisted and snapped in places. But that wasn’t what snagged his attention and wouldn’t let him look away. His father’s body lay curled sickly around a spoke from one of the wheels. His eyes were frozen open in shock, and already his skin was pale. Blood dripped from the corner of his mouth. Several yards to the side, his brother lay on his back, his neck bent at an impossible angle. There was no blood around Miles, but it was glaringly obvious that he was as dead as their father. The driver’s body was splayed far enough from the wreckage to suggest he’d been thrown with some force.

Dead. All three of them dead. Because of a carriage wreck. A wreck Christian had caused.

“My lord, come away.” Boleran was behind him an instant later, resting a hand on his shoulder.

“My mother,” Christian said, the words coming out in a croak.

“My lord, she’s—”

Christian shrugged Boleran off, dashing to the patch of grass several yards away where his mother lay in a crumpled heap, her formal gown like a pillow around her. “Mother,” he shouted, falling to his knees and reaching for her.

His efforts were met by the faintest of groans and a subtle shift from his mother. It was enough for Christian to cry out hysterically, “She’s alive! Somebody fetch a doctor. Fetch a doctor at once!”

He tried to gather her in his arms, but Boleran was on him again, holding his arms back. “Don’t move her, my lord,” he said. “She may have internal injuries. Moving her may kill her. Wait for the doctor.”

“He’s been sent for,” someone shouted behind Christian.

“I want my mother,” Christian wailed, struggling against Boleran and scrambling for his mother’s frail and broken form. “Please, please.”

“Let him hold her,” Marie’s shaky voice said from somewhere behind him. The joy he felt at hearing her voice quickly faded to guilt and misery. He was responsible for killing his father and brother—and perhaps his mother too—and he’d done it with Marie in mind.

“My lord, you really should wait for the doctor,” Boleran went on as Christian ignored him to hunch over his mother, cradling her as best he could while touching her as little as possible.

Something connected in Christian’s mind, and he glanced angrily up at Boleran, dread filling him. “I’m not a lord,” he

said. "I'm just Mr. Darrow."

Boleran shifted anxiously, glancing to Marie for a moment, then over his shoulder at Christian's father and brother's bodies. "I'm afraid, well, that is to say, you...you're the earl now," he said awkwardly.

Christian swallowed the bile that rose to his throat, but it wasn't enough. He let go of his mother and pushed away from her, rolling to the side and vomiting into the grass. Dear God, he was the Earl of Kilrea. Him, a younger son who was never meant to amount to anything. He'd murdered his father and brother for a title.

"Christian." Marie's voice was soft as she crouched by his side, smoothing her hand across his back. "Christian, this wasn't your fault," she whispered.

"Yes, it was," he groaned, burying his face in the cool grass. "I killed them."

"You didn't," Marie went on. Christian couldn't tell if she was actually speaking too softly for anyone but him to hear or if his mind was still playing tricks on him. "You didn't mean for this to happen."

"But I did mean for something to happen," he admitted, too ashamed to turn his face to Marie.

"This isn't your fault," she repeated.

He pushed himself to sit, nearly knocking Marie over as he did. She'd hunched close to him. She still held him as he rocked to his haunches, then stood, shaking her off.

"Where is the doctor?" he asked, not looking at her. He couldn't. The guilt was too strong.

“On the way,” answered a roughly-dressed man Christian didn’t know.

“We should take Lady Kilrea home,” Christian heard himself say in a commanding voice he hadn’t known he could possess. But after all, he was the earl now. “She shouldn’t be here, with this...this...” He dragged his eyes up to stare at the wreckage and his father and brother’s bodies, and the driver’s beyond. “She should be at home,” he finished on a sob.

“Wait until the doctor has come and examined her,” Boleran cautioned him. “It’s the best chance she has.”

“Here he is,” someone shouted in the distance. “Here’s the doctor.”

Christian glanced around, more aware of the scene as the reality of the situation settled around him. A few more carriages had pulled up behind the wreck—probably guests on the way to the engagement party. At least a dozen bystanders stood at the far periphery of the scene, looking horrified and clutching each other. A young woman who seemed to have no place in the middle of such tragedy came forward from the farmer’s wagon with homespun cloths of some sort to cover the bodies of his father and brother.

It was too much for Christian to handle all at once. He turned away from everything, burying his face in his hands, and wept.

IT WAS THE MOST PAINFUL THING MARIE HAD EVER WITNESSED in her life. Not the splintered wreckage of the carriage or the gruesome sight of Lord Kilrea, Miles, and the driver’s bodies. Not the frighteningly injured form of Lady Kilrea. Not even the poor horses that were no longer screaming in pain for

reasons Marie didn't want to think about. Watching Christian fall apart as he stood in the midst of unimaginable loss pierced Marie's heart.

"Stand back," Lord Boleran boomed, taking charge of the situation. "Let the doctor through."

Marie had to give the man credit, even if he'd been on the verge of mercilessly marrying his sister off to Christian. He was savvy and compassionate enough to stand with his body shielding Christian from the startled onlookers, giving Christian a shred of privacy as his world fell apart.

Marie looked right past Lord Boleran, reaching toward Christian as she started forward. "Christian, it wasn't your fault," she said, or at least started to say.

Lord Boleran caught her by the shoulders before she could come within a few feet of Christian. "Stay back, my lady," he told her.

"But Christian needs me," Marie argued, still too broken by Christian's misery to be offended.

She attempted to step away from Lord Boleran, but he held her fast. "Lord Kilrea needs to speak with the doctor and attend to his mother," he told her.

Anger flared suddenly hotter than pity in Marie's heart. "Let me go this instant," she demanded. "Christian is my—" She snapped her mouth shut over the words. There was no reasonable way for her to complete the sentence. Christian was her lover? Yes, he was now, but admitting as much to Lord Boleran under such circumstances wouldn't just be scandalous, it would be crass.

The doctor reached Christian's side, rested a hand briefly on Christian's arm, and spoke something Marie couldn't hear.

Christian sucked in a breath and seemed to pull himself together. He and the doctor rushed to where Lady Kilrea still lay in the billows of her gown. The two men knelt on either side of her, and the doctor went to work.

“Let me go,” Marie repeated to Lord Boleran. “I have to see if Lady Kilrea is alive.”

Lord Boleran kept his hands firmly in place on Marie’s arms but checked over his shoulder as the doctor worked. “She doesn’t appear to be dead to me,” he said.

“How can you tell?” Marie writhed and twisted, trying to get away from him.

“Believe me, my lady. I’ve seen death.” There was a morbid note to his voice that gave Marie a chill, particularly when he glanced to the other side, where the farm girl who had covered Lord Kilrea and Miles’s bodies was now sitting between the two of them, keening as though she were some sort of officially appointed mourner, or perhaps a wise woman charged with seeing their souls to the other side.

“I have to go to him.” Marie tried one last time to shake away from Lord Boleran.

“My lady, I’m so sorry, but your fiancé is dead,” Lord Boleran said.

Marie blinked and checked anxiously on Christian before she realized Lord Boleran was talking about Miles. She swallowed hard and stopped struggling in his grip. The thought that she had been released from her engagement after all turned her stomach instead of making her feel light, like it should have. But it also made her heart bleed more heavily for Christian.

“Please,” she begged Lord Boleran, her voice little more than a wisp. “Let me go.”

Lord Boleran sighed and released her. Marie thought about dashing around him and crouching by Christian’s side, but Christian’s initial bout of grief seemed to have passed. He was stony-faced and grave now—a look that didn’t suit him at all—as he spoke with the doctor.

“She’s alive,” the doctor said, directing the words to Marie and Lord Boleran. “She has several fractures to her arms and legs, and I fear she may have punctured a lung. There’s no way to tell what other internal injuries she’s sustained.”

“Will she live?” Christian asked, his voice strangely hollow.

The doctor sighed. “I don’t know. If there were a hospital nearby, I would urge you to take her there for whatever care they could give. But seeing as the closest hospital is miles away....” He shook his head rather than finishing his sentence. “I’m afraid the journey there would kill her for sure.”

“Can we move her back to Kilrea Manor?” Christian asked.

“Carefully,” the doctor said.

Marie could do nothing but sit back and watch as Christian, the doctor, and several of the men who had arrived on the scene moved Lady Kilrea to the farmer’s wagon. The wagon’s bed was cleared and packed with as many cushions and as much straw as could be found so that the journey home would be as painless as possible. Lady Kilrea didn’t regain consciousness, and the whole time the men worked to move her to the wagon, Marie feared the woman truly was dead but no one had realized it yet. She tried her best to reach

Christian's side, but every time she came close to him, someone pulled her away.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," Lady Aoife said when Marie ended up by her side at the edge of the accident scene. "I know you hadn't yet had time to grow close to Lord Agivey, but he was your fiancé."

It took Marie a few moments to catch up, not only to what Lady Aoife had said, but to the fact that she was there at all. "How...how did you get here?" she asked, too traumatized to think of anything better to say.

"Benedict and I were on our way to the engagement party," Lady Aoife said. "We were within sight of Lord Kilrea's carriage when the driver suddenly lost control."

Marie sucked in a breath so hard at that bit of information that it caused a coughing fit. Lady Aoife slung an arm around Marie's waist and held her carefully. As soon as Marie recovered, she asked, "What happened? Did you see the wreck?"

Lady Aoife bit her lip, looking haunted. "I did."

"What happened?" Marie repeated, pivoting in Lady Aoife's embrace to grab her arms. "Please tell me what happened." Perhaps there was a chance that the carriage hadn't broken apart because of Christian's prank after all. Christian had only loosened a few bolts. Surely, that wasn't enough to cause such catastrophic damage.

"I don't know," Lady Aoife said, tears slipping from her eyes. "They were driving fast. Too fast. Then all at once, there was a twist. The horses broke one way and the carriage looked as though it had been rent in two." She swallowed. "Its

occupants went flying in all directions.” She finished with a wail, unable to go on.

Just like that, Marie was the one comforting Lady Aoife. It was the last thing she wanted to do, considering that more wagons had arrived and men from the nearest village had moved to lift Lord Kilrea and Miles’s bodies into another wagon. A second set of men lifted the driver’s body to a separate wagon. A few others were taking care of the poor horses as well. Something about the whole thing felt desperate and dire to Marie.

“I need to look at the carriage,” she said, not necessarily to Lady Aoife. “I need to see what happened.”

She stepped away from Lady Aoife, feeling horrid for doing so, since the poor dear had no one else’s shoulder to cry on. But a sense of urgency filled Marie. She had to see the wreckage up close. There had to be a way to prove that the disaster hadn’t happened because of the bolts Christian had loosened. The whole thing couldn’t be his fault, it just couldn’t.

She made it halfway across the expanse of grass separating her from the twisted metal and splintered wood before two men whom she didn’t know rushed forward to stop her.

“Stay back, my lady,” one of them said. “It could still be dangerous.”

“But I have to see,” Marie pleaded with them. “I have to check the bolts.”

“No, my lady,” the other said.

“Yes!” Marie shouted. She began to struggle against them in earnest, shouting, “Unhand me! Let me go!”

“Hush, Marie.” The command came from Shannon.

Marie turned, startled to see her oldest sister there at the scene of the wreck. She launched toward Shannon, grabbing her sister's arms as she reached her. "We have to examine the wreckage," she said. "Christian thinks he caused the accident. We have to determine whether his prank is the reason the carriage fell apart. He won't be able to live with himself if it was his fault." Her face crumpled at her last statement as grief swelled within her.

"Christian tampered with the carriage?" Shannon asked, eyes wide.

Marie swallowed hard, then nodded tightly.

"Then perhaps the very last thing we want is to examine the wreckage," Shannon whispered. "If he did cause it, he might be guilty of murder."

Marie thought she might be sick. Of all the ways God could have punished her for the sin of lust and the wickedness of everything she and Christian had done, subjecting Christian to even the whiff of an accusation of murder was the very last thing she expected. What would people say if he really was to blame? Would they accuse him of doing away with his father and brother as a way to gain the Kilrea title? She'd heard Lord Boleran refer to Christian as "my lord" and inform him he was the new earl. Would that alone be enough to raise suspicion?

"No," she whispered, more as a denial of those potential accusations as anything else. She pivoted sharply, searching Christian out. He had climbed into the farmer's wagon and was helping the doctor settle his mother in the nest that had been made for her.

As if he could sense her, he glanced up and met her eyes. Marie lurched forward, as if she could go to him and somehow make the whole situation better. But the blankness of his

expression held her back. He was overwhelmed, beyond feeling anything. She could see that as plainly as if she held him in her arms and the two of them were whispering to each other in bed. All she could do was to put every ounce of the love she felt for him more strongly than ever into her look and nod at him, letting him know she was there for him.

He nodded back, but that was all he could do before the doctor commanded his attention. As soon as he looked away, Marie's heart sank. She couldn't shake the feeling that a terrible wall now divided them.

Seven



The terrible feeling in Marie's heart and gut persisted for days. It kept her up nights, tossing and turning and scrambling to remember as many details of the wreck as she could so that she could exonerate Christian. He couldn't have been the cause of the fatal accident, he simply couldn't have. It was just a harmless prank, a bit of fun. Life was supposed to be fun and filled with laughter...wasn't it?

Twined together with her anxiety about the accident was a worry of a different sort. The morning she and Christian had spent together had been magnificent. She'd known full well that she liked Christian, but kissing him so freely and making love to him had been exquisite. His body was every bit as wonderful in action as it had been to look at. Being with him that way had confirmed the one thought that pulsed louder than any other in her mind or her heart. She loved Christian. Yes, the feelings had come on quickly, but she was sure of them. Christian was the only man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with.

He also wasn't replying to the numerous letters she'd sent him in the three days since the accident. Worse still, those letters had come back unopened. That couldn't be his doing, could it? Surely, some servant or solicitor had taken it upon themselves to deflect all of Christian's communications,

seeing as he had suddenly been weighted down with the responsibilities of the earldom and his mother's continued dangerous health.

"Good heavens, Marie. You've been holding that spoon halfway to your mouth for so long that I'm surprised your soup hasn't evaporated," Shannon said, snapping Marie out of her thoughts.

Marie blinked rapidly, lowering her spoon and letting it sink in her bowl of soup. She hadn't had much of an appetite for the last few days anyhow. Who could think about food in such a dire situation?

She blinked again when she realized her sisters were all staring at her. Fergus and Henrietta had been invited out to luncheon, which meant the four of them had been left to their own devices for the meal. But instead of laughing uproariously over someone's amusing story or plotting mischief, Marie's sisters were unusually somber. And they were all studying her with varying degrees of worry.

"You've hardly eaten anything since...." Chloe bit her lip, shrugged, and finished simply with, "Since."

"You've hardly spoken either," Colleen said with a far more somber air. "Which is twice as concerning, if you ask me."

"I haven't had much to say," Marie told them, her voice sounding hoarse and unused.

Shannon reached across the corner of the table and covered Marie's hand with her own. "This is a trying time," she said sympathetically, ever the eldest sister. "First, Fergus threw you into an engagement that you didn't want and that was clearly unsuitable for you. Then, your fiancé is killed in an accident."

“Not to mention that Marie was one of the first on the scene,” Colleen said with a little too much excitement in her eyes. Colleen always had had a fascination with the morbid.

At the moment, Marie didn’t appreciate it at all. “It’s not that,” she said, her voice dropping to a listless sigh. “I’m terribly worried about Christian.”

Her sisters all seemed to freeze for a moment. They exchanged looks that made it clear all three of them knew full well there was much more to the story than they’d been told.

“It’s kind of you to be concerned for Lord Kilrea,” Shannon said carefully. She eyed Marie closely, as if waiting to see how she would react to Christian being referred to by his new title.

Marie sent her a flat look in return. As much as she enjoyed games and merriment, she wasn’t in the mood for anything but the bald truth. “We’re lovers,” she blurted before she lost the nerve. It was technically true, even if their affair was new.

Her sisters reacted with varying degrees of surprise, and in Chloe’s case, delight.

“How exciting and delicious,” Chloe said, eyes sparkling. “Is he a good lover? Does he make you feel spectacular? How long does it take to do that anyhow? When do you—”

“Chloe, hush.” Shannon silenced her with a stern look. “Now is not the time to interrogate Marie about such things.” Her mouth twitched up in one corner. “Though any other time I would encourage every inappropriate question possible, if only as punishment for not telling the rest of us what you intended sooner.”

“It happened quite unexpectedly,” Marie told them, leaning stiffly back in her chair and fiddling nervously with the edge of her soup bowl.

“I’ll say.” Colleen stared at her with curious, narrowed eyes. “The two of you only met a month ago.”

“I suppose you could say it was love at first sight,” Marie sighed, biting her lip and feeling unaccountably sad at the prospect instead of delighted.

“I thought love at first sight only happened in storybooks,” Chloe said with a dreamy look, leaning one elbow on the table and resting her chin in her hand.

“If I recall correctly, that first sight involved the sight of his prick,” Shannon said, one eyebrow arched.

Marie answered Shannon’s stare with a quelling look. “Christian Darrow is more than just a fine prick,” she said. “He’s a lovely, warm, open-hearted man. Whether we’d known each other one day or one hundred years, it would be the same. We knew at once we were meant for each other.” She supposed that was true, looking back on their meeting.

She wriggled uncomfortably in her chair as her sisters continued to stare at her. “And then Fergus had the audacity to engage me to his brother, and Christian’s father was mad enough to betroth him to Lady Aoife.”

“Both of which were terrible ideas,” Shannon said, nodding and gesturing for her to go on.

Marie’s face heated, and she couldn’t meet her sisters’ eyes. “The trouble with being a sensitive, open-hearted man is that Christian was angry over the deal his father made for him. He had a plan to force his father into calling the marriages off. That plan began with a prank that he believed would ensure

his father didn't make it to the engagement party." She swallowed hard. "He loosened all the bolts on the underside of his father's carriage."

As expected, all three of her sisters gasped. Shannon looked wary, perhaps remembering the conversation she and Marie had had immediately after the accident.

"He didn't mean to do them any harm," Marie continued with a sudden burst of energy, needing to defend him. "The mischief wasn't supposed to be fatal, and I don't believe it was. I was there when he tampered with the carriage. I saw what he did with my own eyes. I don't believe he did enough to cause the sort of damage I witnessed at the site of the wreck."

"But Lord Kilrea believes he's responsible," Shannon said in a hushed voice.

Marie thanked God that her sister was clever enough to understand the workings of human emotions and guilt. Even so, Marie shook her head and said, "He is *not* responsible. He didn't kill his father and brother. I know it, but he doesn't. I have to find a way to prove to him that the accident wasn't his fault."

"How do you propose to do that?" Shannon asked.

Marie shook her head and shrugged restlessly. "I don't know. I tried to examine the wreckage right after the crash. If I could have just taken a look at the broken axle, checked to see if the bolts were loose or tight and if the breaks happened where everything was fastened together or somewhere else." She felt foolish attempting to explain the construction and workings of the underside of a carriage when, in truth, she didn't know any more about it than she did about the insides of a clock.

A thoughtful look came over Shannon's face. "If everything I've been told was true, Lord Boleran was the first at the scene."

"Yes, he was," Marie said miserably.

"And he stayed behind to supervise the removal of the bodies and the wreckage of the carriage," Shannon went on.

"He did," Colleen said with an unusually fierce scowl. "At least, that's what I heard." Her cheeks colored suddenly and she avoided her sisters' eyes.

Shannon turned her attention to Colleen. "You have something of an acquaintance with Lord Boleran, do you not?"

Colleen crossed her arms and stared darkly at Shannon. "What are you getting at?"

Marie's interest perked slightly. She hadn't realized there was any sort of connection between Colleen and Lord Boleran. All signs were that there was not only a connection, there was a story.

"Colleen can go to Lord Boleran and ask him what he observed about the carriage," Shannon said, as though the solution were obvious. "With any luck, Lord Boleran will know where the wreckage is now, and Marie can take Lord Kilrea to inspect it."

"I'm not wasting a moment of my day seeking out Lord High and Mighty to ask him about carriage wreckage," Colleen said with a surprising amount of vehemence.

"Not even for the sake of your sister and her handsome and wounded lover?" Chloe asked her with a teasing grin.

Colleen clenched her jaw tightly for a moment, then blew out a breath, letting her arms drop as she did. "Oh, all right,"

she sighed. “For Marie and for poor Lord Kilrea. But I won’t stay to pass the time of day with the Marquess of Snobsbury.”

“Thank you,” Marie said, her spirits lifting a bit. “Anything Lord Boleran can tell you that might serve as proof that the carriage wrecked for some reason other than the bolts Christian loosened would be glorious.”

“In the meantime,” Shannon went on, facing Marie, “you need to eat something before you wither away into a useless slip of nothing. Men don’t like to take sticks to their bed.”

Marie let out a soft laugh and picked up her soup spoon. Her appetite was well on its way to returning, but she didn’t feel completely settled yet.

As soon as luncheon was over and the sisters split to go about their own business, she headed out to the stables, where her bicycle was kept. If Christian wouldn’t receive or read her letters, she’d have to speak to him in person, no matter what it took. She mounted her bicycle and sped off down the road toward Kilrea Manor. With a month of practice behind her, she considered herself an expert bicyclist, which meant she had no qualms at all about pedaling as fast as the wind, in spite of the fierce glares she received from several people along the road.

She didn’t much care to hear about her wicked ways later, though, so as she approached the Kilrea estate, she veered off the main road to take a more discreet, back way to the manor. That path led her along the lush, green valley that divided Christian’s property from that of his neighbor, Lord Garvagh. A spring ran the length of the valley, heading toward the sea in the far distance. Close to where it originated, a quaint springhouse had been built. A cluster of trees stood behind the springhouse.

Those trees were where she spotted Lord Garvagh and none other than Lady Aoife. At first, Marie wasn't sure it was them. She was in motion, after all, and at least fifty yards away on the path that cut across the valley on the way up to the manor house. Lord Garvagh was easy enough to make out, with his distinct blond hair and strong build. It was Lady Aoife who came as a surprise to Marie. Though she only had a fleeting glance of the woman as she pedaled past, Marie was certain Lady Aoife was in tears, speaking passionately to Lord Garvagh about something.

She only had a minute or so to contemplate the odd scene before huffing and puffing up the hill to the manor's back gardens. All thoughts of Lord Garvagh and Lady Aoife vanished the moment she spotted Christian pacing along the back edge of the garden. Her heart lifted and sank, filling with joy at the sight of him, then sorrow at how miserable Christian looked.

"Christian!" she called out, somehow finding the strength to pedal faster up the last few yards of the hill.

Christian jerked and spun toward her. His expression was grave, but for one, glorious moment, it lifted at the sight of her. All too soon it fell again. He stood still, his shoulders squared in a way that was too stiff and didn't suit him, as Marie rode closer. She had hoped he'd spot her, burst into relief, and run to her, but all he did was wait, his face pinched in misery, as she came to a stop, dismounted and abandoned her bicycle, then rushed toward him.

"Christian," she panted, pressing a hand to her chest as she caught her breath. "I've been so worried about you. I sent you letters, but they were returned."

“I didn’t deserve to read them,” he said, his voice tired and cracking.

Marie stopped short a few feet from him, blinking in surprise. “So you knew that I sent them? They weren’t returned by a servant or...or someone else.”

“I returned them,” he confessed. Even though he met her gaze firmly, there was something distant and hollow in his eyes, like he wasn’t truly there. His eyes were ringed with dark circles, as though he hadn’t slept well since the accident. His face was pale and wan, and a layer of dark stubble covered his chin, as though he hadn’t had either the time or the will to shave for days. Worst of all, the spark had gone out of his countenance.

“Oh, Christian.” Marie surged toward him, throwing her arms around him and hugging him for all she was worth. “I’m so sorry.”

He let her hug him, but that was the best that Marie could say. His body was rigid, and even though she couldn’t see how it would have been possible in so few days, he felt thinner, diminished somehow. It broke her heart to feel his sadness. No, it went beyond sadness, beyond grief, even. Poor Christian was tortured.

“It wasn’t your fault,” she said, swaying back but keeping her hands on his arms.

“It was absolutely my fault,” he whispered, his voice cracking with guilt and shame. “How could it not be?”

“I swear to you, Christian. I was there with you when you played the prank. You didn’t loosen enough bolts or tamper with the carriage enough for it to fly apart the way it did,” Marie insisted.

“And how would you know?” He wrenched away from her, his agony turning to anger, another emotion he didn’t wear well at all. “What do you know about carriages?”

“Nothing,” Marie confessed, letting her arms fall uselessly to her sides. “But I know everything about you, and you aren’t capable of murder.”

“You don’t know anything about me, Marie.” The look he sent her was probably meant to be withering, but it missed its mark. She had the innate sense that he was trying to put her off, either to discourage her or punish himself. “We’ve barely met. We hardly know each other.”

“I know more than enough about you to know you could never willfully hurt anyone,” Marie said firmly. She wasn’t about to let him chase her off.

Apparently, he had yet to catch on to her stubbornness. “You don’t know half of the wicked things I’ve done,” he said, taking a step closer to her that was meant to be intimidating. “You don’t know the things I did at university or the trouble I got into in Europe with my mates.”

It was the wrong time to laugh, but Marie broke into a pitying smile all the same. “Name a single man who doesn’t get up to some sort of wickedness while at university,” she said. “Or a young man who doesn’t cause more trouble than is good for him while swanning about Europe with his friends.” He glanced away, jaw tight, so she went on with, “I doubt a single bit of the mischief you’ve gotten into in your past is anything other than jolly good fun.”

Christian’s shoulders slumped a bit more, and he shook his head. “My time for fun is over,” he said, bitterness mingling with grief in his voice and expression. “I’m an earl now, or haven’t you heard?” He glanced back to her with a look so

piteous that it squeezed Marie's heart to the point of pain. "I have an estate to sort out that comes complete with a property dispute. My mother is still in grave danger and hasn't awakened since the accident. And I've a marriage to prepare for." He looked away from her with his last statement, face pinching with despair.

Marie's heart dropped to her feet. "Christian. You cannot tell me that after everything that has passed between the two of us, you intend to go through with your marriage to Lady Aoife." Desperation pulsed through her, making her dizzy.

Christian shrugged. "It was my father's last wish for me," he said in a voice so quiet and melancholy Marie almost couldn't make out his words. "I was such a disappointment to him. The least I can do is obey his last command."

"No, that is not the least you can do," Marie nearly shouted. Christian flinched and glanced toward her. "Marrying a woman you do not love when one who you do love is standing right in front of you is not the proper way to honor your father's memory. Punishing yourself for the rest of your life because you feel responsible for his death is madness, Christian. And besides," her panic subsided a bit as she remembered what she'd seen on the way to the manor, "I believe Lady Aoife is in love with someone else."

Christian frowned at her. "If you're saying that as a way to convince me to change my mind—"

"I'm not. It's true," Marie insisted. "I saw her down at the springhouse with Lord Garvagh just now."

Christian's brow knit together in thought. "What is Ned doing talking to Lady Aoife at the springhouse?"

“Having a secret lovers’ rendezvous, no doubt,” Marie said, crossing her arms and glaring at him. She was surprised by the amount of sarcasm in her voice and the seemingly poor timing of that sarcasm, but if Christian thought he could just forget what they’d done, he had another think coming. “Lovers’ rendezvous? Remember those?” she added for good measure.

Christian turned his head to her, his eyes focusing on hers. For a moment, the flash and the desire were back in his expression. Marie even thought she spotted the corner of his mouth twitching up in a fond grin. The split-second reaction faded as quickly as it appeared, though, and Christian shook his head.

“I cannot indulge in childish games and frivolous fantasies anymore,” he said. “Father was right. Life is far more serious than that.”

“Firstly, I am going to ignore the fact that you just referred to our love as a frivolous fantasy, because I understand you are grieving.” Christian glanced away, looking guiltier than ever. “Beyond that, life is only as serious as you make it,” Marie argued. “And you, Christian Darrow, were not born to be the sort of man your father was.”

“Except that it would seem I am,” Christian replied with a helpless shrug. “I wasn’t supposed to inherit his title, his land, or his responsibility, but here I am.” He held out his arms as if to gesture to everything around them.

“My lord.” The call came from a footman who strode purposefully across the garden toward them.

“See?” Christian gestured to the young man, his whole body seeming to sag under the weight of the title.

“My lord, you have a visitor,” the footman said.

“I thought I told the staff that I was not at home to visitors today,” Christian sighed, walking toward the footman. Marie could do nothing but stand by and watch.

“It’s Lord Garvagh,” the footman said. “He would like to speak with you on a matter of some urgency. Considering the dispute he had with your father, I thought—”

“Yes, yes, it’s all right, Patrick. I’ll speak to him,” Christian said, gesturing for the footman to go and heading toward the house.

“I’ll come with you,” Marie said, starting after him.

“No.” Christian turned to stop her. Marie pulled up short, her mouth dropping open in protest. “It would be grossly improper for you to be seen at my house,” he went on. “Especially since you’re not even wearing black.” He glanced at her. Heat filled his eyes for a moment, but he forced himself to look away.

Indeed, Marie had boldly chosen not to wear mourning black, even though her fiancé had just been killed. Instead, she wore the darkest green she had, hoping all and sundry would think that was good enough.

“Go home, Marie,” Christian called to her as he headed on toward the house. “It isn’t right for you to be here. Take your bicycle and ride off to find a man who can love you the way you deserve to be loved.”

“But—” Marie stopped herself from protesting as Christian left her. She forced herself to take a deep breath. She loved him, but he was behaving like an arse.

Then again, the man had just lost his father and brother, he could still lose his mother, and he blamed himself thoroughly

for the tragedy. In addition to that, he'd had an entire title and everything that went along with it thrown at him when all he'd been expected to do with his life before was enjoy it. The turnabout was so stark for Christian that it was no wonder he wasn't thinking clearly.

She would give him the benefit of the doubt for now, but she wouldn't sit idly by and let him push her out of his life to punish himself. She was more determined than ever to prove to him not only that the accident hadn't been his fault, but that life could still be full of joy and happiness, even after tragedy.

Eight



Once, when Christian was stumbling home after a night of carousing with his friends in Rome, he'd stumbled and fallen down a flight of stone stairs. In the process, he'd dislocated his shoulder and had to have one of his other drunken friends push the joint back into his socket. But the pain of that night was nothing to the pain he experienced as he walked away from Marie, knowing he'd hurt her with his coldness.

He hadn't been able to stop thinking about her in the last few days. At least, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her when his mind cleared enough from the fog of grief and estate business that had settled over him. After his wretched meeting with his father's man of business to bring him up to date on the most dire aspects of his father's dealings, he'd sunken into contemplation of Marie. On his return home from the coroner, after making arrangements for his father and Miles's burials, he'd consoled himself by remembering the way Marie's arms felt around him. All through his consultation with Dr. Phillips about his mother's chances of recovery, he'd contemplated how much easier everything would be if Marie were there to tend to things on his behalf. He thought about how it would be if she were there to tend to him.

Every time his thoughts had turned sweet and flown to her, he'd cursed himself for a fool and forced himself to concentrate. Marie was a beautiful dream that he didn't deserve. Murderers didn't deserve to be happy. And besides, he had a legacy to live up to. He needed to become his father's son.

"That's all bullshit, you know," a voice whispered at the back of his head as he trudged through the garden on his way into the house. "She's right. You're punishing yourself for what happened by keeping her away."

He couldn't hide the truth from himself. But just because he recognized what he was doing and was well aware that he was using Marie—or rather, her absence—as a means of punishing himself, didn't mean he had any intention of stopping. He deserved nothing less than to feel as horrible as it was possible for him to feel.

And yet, underneath all of the tragedy and torture, he could still feel his heart beating. The feeling was faint. The kernel of joy that couldn't be crushed was tiny. But it was there. He would have to destroy it soon, though. Joy had no place in the running of an estate, or in a family that had been decimated by death.

"Oh. Lord Kilrea."

Christian jerked to a stop at the soft, polite exclamation that came from Lady Aoife. She seemed as surprised to see him in the main hallway of his house as he was to see her. The woman's face was as pale and pinched as ever, perhaps more so. A sadness of some sort rimmed her eyes with the slightest bit of red. It was the only hit of color the woman had, either physically or in her spirit. Bless her, but Lady Aoife had always paled in comparison to Marie.

Christian shook himself, forcing his thoughts away from where they wanted to be and focusing on where he should direct them. “Lady Aoife. I had no idea you were here.” He approached her gingerly, hands twitching as he debated whether to reach out to her. If she were Marie, he would have folded her in a tight embrace, buried his face against her neck, and breathed in the scent of her as if it were what gave him life. With Lady Aoife, he was afraid to touch her lest she shatter, like a woman made of glass.

“I...I came to inquire about your mother,” Lady Aoife said, eyes downcast. She wrung her tiny hands together in front of her—a sign that she was more distraught than she was letting on. Her hands seemed as fragile as the rest of her, and certainly not capable of clasping him close and digging into the muscles of his back, as Marie had during that glorious morning they’d spent together.

Again, he had to force his errant thoughts back to where they should be. “Have you been up to see Mama yet?” he asked as kindly as he could manage.

Lady Aoife looked up at him as if he’d suggested she descend to the kitchen to help Cook with tea. “I couldn’t possibly impose on you in that way, my lord.”

Christian smiled tightly. “But, surely, you have a strong connection to this family.” He couldn’t bring himself to say she would be his wife soon and his mother would be her mother-in-law. He could barely stand to form the thought in his head with her standing right there in front of him, looking like a faded doll instead of the sunburst that was Marie.

“Forgive me,” he went on. “I’m being rude. You’ve come all this way.... Could I offer you tea?”

“Well...er...” She glanced over her shoulder to the parlor. A flush painted her cheeks that had Christian frowning, as though something were going on that he wasn’t fully aware of. “If...if you wouldn’t mind,” she finished in an almost inaudible voice, lowering her head again.

“I don’t mind at all,” Christian said. “I’m supposed to be meeting Lord Garvagh, but whatever his business is, perhaps he wouldn’t mind a lady as lovely as you sitting in on it.”

The only reason the compliment was able to pass his lips, the only reason he suggested tea at all and led Lady Aoife toward the parlor was because of what Marie had said. She’d spotted the two of them together by the springhouse, and now here they both were, under his roof. It was as likely as not to be a coincidence. Ned must have been on his way over before and met Lady Aoife on the road. Which was nowhere near the springhouse, but still.

Christian tried to ignore the surge of excitement pulsing through him. He cursed himself for entertaining anything as fanciful and foolish as a secret love affair as he showed Lady Aoife into the parlor. Secret love affairs were jolly good fun, even when they were other people’s, but that part of his life was over and done. He was an earl now, and his father’s successor. He should be serious, mature, and somber.

But his breath caught in his throat at the way Ned’s gaze shot straight to Lady Aoife the moment she entered the room. Hope stirred in him as color actually splashed to Lady Aoife’s face, though she kept that face turned away from both him and Ned. He had no right whatsoever to feel the urge to grin at the sudden longing in Ned’s eyes, or the way he closed up his expression so fast that Christian felt he should hear the sound of a door slamming to go along with it.

“Garvagh,” he said with all the gravitas that the meeting warranted, leaving Lady Aoife to cross the room and shake Ned’s hand. “What a pleasure to see you.”

“I’m sure it is no pleasure at all,” Ned said in his deep bass. “I am so sorry for your loss, Christian. You must know that.”

A different kind of hope glimmered in Christian’s chest. Ned was the first person to refer to him by his given name since the accident. It was a tiny thing, but for the first time in days, it made Christian feel like a man and not a title.

“Thank you, Ned.” He returned the favor with as much of a smile as he could manage.

“Your father was a hard man, but a noble one,” Ned went on, standing tall and clasping his hands behind his back. For a moment, his gaze flickered to Lady Aoife again.

“Father was Father,” Christian said with a wistful look, then quickly said, “I hope you don’t mind if Lady Aoife takes tea with us. She’s come to inquire after my mother’s condition. I felt it would be cruel to send her away with just a short report or to stick her in a separate parlor while we conduct our business.” He glanced between the two, keeping an eye out for anything that would support Marie’s theory that there was something between the pair.

“How is your mother?” Ned asked, managing to be both compassionate and irritatingly vague about his feelings for Lady Aoife. Other than the initial looks, it was hard to tell if the man even knew she was there.

Christian sighed and rubbed a hand over his face, gesturing for Ned to have a seat on one of the parlor’s many chairs. “She’s no better than she was yesterday,” he confessed. Every

thought of romantic undercurrents—or anything enjoyable and diverting—flew from Christian’s mind as he glanced to the ceiling and his mother’s bed chamber above. “She hasn’t awakened since the crash. Dr. Phillips says she may still be suffering from grievous internal injuries we cannot see.”

“They still don’t advise moving her to a hospital?” Lady Aoife asked, nodding to the maid who brought a tea tray into the room. Someone must have thought to fix tea for the guests before Christian could come up with the idea.

Christian shook his head. “Dr. Phillips says that as long as she is comfortable and as long as she is able to be fed by the nurses caring for her here, she should stay where she is.”

“You know that if there is anything I can do to help,” Lady Aoife began, leaving the statement open-ended.

“Thank you.” Christian nodded to her, genuinely grateful, but with no intention of asking her to help in any way. He knew beyond a doubt that if Marie had made the same offer, he would have whisked her up to his mother’s room immediately and had her take over his mother’s care.

That thought was interrupted when Ned cleared his throat. “Christian, I just wanted you to know that, until everything is settled and you are comfortable with your new position in life, I won’t press you about this property boundary dispute I had with your father.”

Christian’s brow lifted in surprise. “I was under the impression that you were adamant about your claims to the land in question. The land your father, and now you, claim is on your property encompasses the spring, does it not?”

“It does,” Ned said hesitantly, as if he truly didn’t want to talk about the dispute yet. “And as you know, that spring is

vital to irrigation for both of our tenant farms, and as a source of drinking water for the tenants.”

Christian nodded in understanding, but already his mind was beginning to cloud again with the details. “All I know about the whole thing is that my father was firm in his belief that the land and water rights were ours,” he sighed. A headache was beginning to form behind his temples, so he rubbed them. “I’m sorry if I can’t recall the details about it off-hand. I’ll have to be brought up to speed with Father’s man of business. Surely, there has to be a way we can resolve the dispute.”

“I’m sure there is,” Ned said with a kind smile. He stood. “If you’ll excuse me, I truly don’t want to impose on you at this time, and it would appear now is not a good time for a social call.”

He must have thought Christian had more of a headache than he did. All the same, Christian wasn’t sad that the man wanted to leave. He rose as well and shook Ned’s hand again. “Thank you for your concern for my mother,” he said.

“I should go as well,” Lady Aoife said, standing and setting her barely-touched tea aside. She stole a glance at Ned. “Lord Garvagh, would you be so kind as to accompany me to where my brother is waiting for me in the village?”

“But of course, my lady.”

Marie was right. Christian was sure of it as they all said their final goodbyes. But even if Lady Aoife had feelings for Ned and those feelings were returned, what could any of them do about it? Even as part of him argued that the solution was so simple a child could see what should be done next, the part of Christian that was lashed with grief and fuzzy with mourning refused to let go of the idea that he owed it to his

father to follow through with his marital plans. He couldn't shake the feeling that marrying his father's choice for him would finally make him worthy in the old man's eyes, even if he was dead. Christian had killed the man, after all. He had an obligation to stick to the plan. That could make everything right.

Couldn't it?

As soon as Ned and Lady Aoife were gone, he flopped onto the sofa beside the table where the tea tray rested. His head pounded more than he wanted to think about, and his heart throbbed aching along with it. He knew full well that he wasn't thinking straight, that he couldn't think straight, under the circumstances. He wasn't prepared for what lay ahead of him. He hadn't worked his way up to it. Yes, he'd done well at Cambridge. He'd learned enough to get by. But he was an amateur when it came to running an estate and doing what was right for an old family name. But he could still hear his father telling him he was worthless and that he couldn't even stick to a plan as simple as marrying the woman of his choice. Christian would have done just about anything to be able to speak with his mother about it. Her opinion would have gone miles toward helping him decide what he should do next.

He had to speak with someone. That truth hit him square in the gut. He might have been an earl and a proud man, but he wasn't so proud that he couldn't seek advice when he needed it. But who was there left to seek advice from? His father was gone. His cousin John was in England. Few other family members remained, and none of them were nearby.

The answer didn't come to him until late that night, as he was crawling, exhausted, into bed. His family was either dead

now or scattered to the four winds, but Marie's family was still on hand. Specifically, Marie's brother, Fergus. And while Christian didn't know Fergus O'Shea as well as all that, he trusted the man. Anyone who had endured what Fergus had and came out stronger for it was exactly the sort of person Christian wanted to consult with.

He had to wait until morning, wait until the hour was reasonable to pay a visit to a neighbor. As soon as he could the next day, he washed, dressed, shaved, donned his hat, and made himself presentable enough to pay a call.

It was still embarrassingly early when he showed up on Dunegard Castle's doorstep. It was a good sign that Fergus accepted his call all the same. The man even looked happy to see Christian when a footman showed him into the richly-decorated office deep into the family portion of the house.

"Kilrea," Fergus propelled his chair forward, extending a hand to Christian once he entered the room. "How are you, man?"

"I've been better," Christian said, removing his hat and gripping Fergus's hand. He was more grateful than he would have expected for the strength Fergus showed.

"Understandable." Fergus gestured for Christian to have a seat in one of the leather armchairs in the center of the room. Christian sat, feeling more comfortable once he was on Fergus's level. "I take it there's something I can help you with?" Fergus said, raising the eyebrow over his one eye.

Christian sighed, writhing with second thoughts about letting on that he was anything but prepared for his new life. "I need advice," he said before he could change his mind. "About how to be an earl."

Fergus blinked, inching back in his chair slightly. “That wasn’t what I assumed you’d come here for.”

Christian had the good sense to look guilty. “You thought I had come to ask about your sister,” he said. He wasn’t stupid, and he didn’t think Fergus was either.

Fergus grinned wistfully. “She hasn’t given me a moment’s peace about mucking things up with all that engagement nonsense. I’m just so deeply sorry that she had to get her way and get out of the engagement to your brother in the manner she did.”

Christian winced. “She didn’t get her way entirely,” he said, staring at his hat in his hands.

There was a pause before Fergus said, “So you’re going to go through with marrying Lady Aoife? Even though you’re a daft fool who is in love with my sister?”

Christian snapped his eyes up to meet Fergus’s. “Is it that obvious?”

“Yes, man, it is,” Fergus laughed. “The two of you have been shameless since the engagements were announced.”

Christian averted his gaze from Fergus. The man had no idea how shameless they’d been. Still, as hard as he’d tried in the last few days, Christian couldn’t regret bedding Marie. And he couldn’t reconcile the war within him that said he owed more to Marie for ruining her, as was their intent, than he did to Lady Aoife. His heart knew what he should be doing, but his head was still so hopelessly clouded with his father’s voice and with guilt. The confusion of the whole thing was maddening. And that was without taking his part in the wreck into consideration. Every which way he turned, every avenue

of thought he pursued, was fraught with complications and guilt.

“I don’t know what to do,” he confessed at last, shrugging helplessly. “I owe so much to so many people so suddenly. I want one thing, but I know I have to accept another. No one prepares you for your entire life being turned upside down in a moment.”

“Don’t I know it,” Fergus laughed, writhing uncomfortably in his chair.

“That’s why I’ve come to you for advice,” Christian rushed on. “You’re the only person I can think of who has experienced a reversal of fortune like this.”

“I am,” Fergus admitted with a grave nod.

“How did you handle it?” Christian leaned forward, setting his hat aside and resting his arms on his knees to stare intently at Fergus. “How did you juggle your responsibilities and your desires? How did you choose between duty and yourself? How could you ever let yourself be happy again?”

The last question tumbled out of him before Christian could stop himself. For Fergus, there probably hadn’t been any question of whether he could or should be happy. The attack that had changed his life hadn’t been his fault. He hadn’t been the one wielding the club. Not like Christian had.

Fergus studied him with a brotherly look and let out a sigh. “There’s no way to go on but to take one step at a time. Proverbial steps, mind you,” he added with a wry grin, patting one of his legs.

“I’m sorry,” Christian said, not entirely sure why. It was the only thing he could say that seemed appropriate these days.

He was sorry for the pain of others and sorry for the destruction he'd caused through his own carelessness.

Fergus shrugged. "Part of my life ended," he said. "Another part began. I was lucky to have a good woman standing by my side. Mind you, I tried to run her off. Henrietta wouldn't have it, though. She was far smarter than I was in the end."

A long pause followed. Christian had been staring at his knees as Fergus spoke. When he looked up, he found Fergus staring pointedly at him.

"You have a good woman who's willing to stand by your side too, you know," he said. "And I'm not talking about Lady Aoife."

Shame hit Christian fast and hard. "I don't deserve Marie," he said, aching on the inside. "I don't deserve to be happy, after what I've done."

"Come off it, man," Fergus scoffed. "I understand you're still in shock and you've a great deal more grieving left to do, but only a dolt denies himself—"

Fergus didn't have a chance to finish his scolding. Peals of laughter sounded from the hall outside of the office. A moment later, Marie passed by the doorway with one of her sisters. The two of them were laughing over something. A bolt of joy hit Christian square in the heart, filling him with a burst of longing so acute it squeezed his throat, making any speech impossible. Marie was and always would be the most beautiful, amazing thing he'd ever seen.

But hard on the heels of that moment of light, darkness caved in on him. What right did he have to be happy when his

father and brother were dead? What right did Marie have to laugh when the tragedy would swallow up her life too?

Irrational anger lifted him to his feet, and he shot out of Fergus's office, chasing after Marie. Part of him screamed to think twice about what he was doing, but the gaping chasm of sorrow inside of him suddenly seemed to encompass everything. It dragged him under into impulsive desolation before he could stop himself.

“How dare you?” he snapped, grabbing Marie's arm and stopping her in her tracks. She gasped and spun to face him, her eyes wide, but the dam of bitterness that he'd so carefully managed to maintain since the accident burst. “How dare you smile and laugh and pretend as if the world is nothing but a joke when everything has been completely and utterly ruined?”

Nine



Marie had never been so shocked in her life. Not only was it a surprise to find Christian in her house too early in the morning for calls, she was startled into silence by the uncharacteristic anger rippling off of him. Everything about him seemed red, from the flush that painted his face to the embroidered accents in his otherwise drab, black waistcoat.

She glanced him up and down, wondering if he was aware of the hint of inappropriate color in the way he was dressed. And he had the nerve to demand why she was smiling?

“There is nothing wrong with me being in a merry mood,” she hissed, shaking his hands off of her.

“There is when your fiancé is dead and the man you profess to love is to blame,” Christian snapped in return.

He seemed to suddenly notice Colleen a few steps farther down the hall, watching the entire exchange with wide, interested eyes. Marie spotted Fergus wheeling into the doorway of his study.

“What in blazes is going on out here?” Fergus demanded with a frown.

“Nothing,” Marie told him. She grabbed Christian’s hand and tugged him down the hall. “I need to have a word with Mr.

Darrow in private.”

“It’s Lord Kilrea now, and it is highly inappropriate for the two of us to be given any sort of privacy whatsoever,” Christian grumbled, letting Marie lead him down the hall to a drab parlor that was rarely used all the same.

“Do you see my brother trying to stop us?” Marie asked over her shoulder, one eyebrow arched. “Or my sister for that matter?” She immediately answered her own question with. “No. And they won’t. Because they can see as clearly as I can that you, Christian Darrow, need a stern talking to.”

She pulled him all the way into the stuffy parlor then turned to face him, arms crossed. Christian’s mouth fell open, and he gaped at her as though she’d grown another head. “My entire world has fallen apart, and you’re treating me like a disobedient child?”

“Your entire world has fallen apart,” Marie repeated. “That is why I didn’t slap you on the spot and run you out of the house while poking you in your backside with a fire iron.”

She couldn’t maintain her irritation or continue on with sharp words. Not when Christian’s shoulders fell as though he carried the weight of the Matterhorn. He let out a heavy breath and scrubbed a hand across his face. With the initial bout of emotion between them over, she could see how exhausted Christian was. Dark circles still rimmed his eyes. His dark, curly hair was more unruly than usual. His eyes still held little more than pain and regret. It was as though Marie were looking at a badly-drawn image of him instead of the real Christian.

She took a cautious step toward him, resting a hand on his back, then rubbing it. “How is your mother today?” she asked,

hoping it was a topic that would defuse his obviously raw emotions.

“The same,” Christian admitted in a small voice. “She has yet to awaken, but she appears to be resting comfortably. She is able to swallow the broth that the nurse feeds her, even though she isn’t conscious of it.”

“That’s something,” Marie said. She shifted to stand facing him fully, risking a slight smile. “Do you want to know why I was smiling and laughing just now?” she asked.

Christian’s brow darkened, which wasn’t at all the reaction Marie was hoping for. “Have you pulled some sort of jolly prank on one of your sisters? Did you find another naked man on the beach, and did you convince the locals he was a merman this time?”

Marie pursed her lips. “You’re an arse when you’re upset,” she said. “But I tell you, to me, that only proves that you’re not as crushed by everything that happened as you say you are.”

“I am devastated,” he croaked. For a moment, Marie thought he would burst into tears, as shocking and unmanly as that would have been.

“Devastated, but not defeated,” she told him, keeping her back straight and her chin up. If Christian didn’t have strength of his own at the moment, she would need to be strong for both of them. “You wouldn’t be snapping about like a Nile crocodile or shouting at me if you didn’t have life left within you.”

He gaped at her. “Of all the cruel things to say when my father and brother have had their lives dashed out of them due to my fecklessness.”

Marie took a deep breath before going on. Christian's pain and guilt were raw, and she had the feeling it would take a monumental effort to bring him out of both.

"The carriage accident was not your fault," she said, pulse racing with the information Colleen had discovered late the day before.

"Please, Marie, don't." Christian rubbed a hand over his face again. "I need to come to terms with—"

"The bolts on the carriage's axle were as tight as could be," Marie interrupted him.

Christian's mouth continued to hang open for a minute as he stared at her. "How do you know?"

"Lord Boleran told Colleen as much yesterday," Marie said, breaking into a smile. "That's why I was smiling and laughing. Colleen hates the man, but she called on him to ask about his impressions of the wreck. We both saw that he was the first one on the scene, and he took charge of disposing of the wreckage afterwards. He told Colleen that there was nothing at all wrong with the bolts."

"Why did that cause you to laugh?" he asked.

"I wasn't laughing at the accident, I was laughing at the way Colleen was making a complete ninny of herself by grouching about Lord Boleran."

For a moment, Christian continued to stare at her. Hope lit his expression. He shook it away far too soon, turning from Marie. "He must not have looked carefully enough. What else could cause a wreck so destructive? He must have looked at the axle wrong."

"Would you rather believe that? Do you *want* yourself to be at fault somehow?" Marie crossed her arms again. "Or will

you see the truth of things and accept that accidents happen?”

“I should have been a better son,” Christian whipped back toward her. “I should have obeyed my father without question and without hesitation.”

“By marrying a woman you don’t love and living the rest of your life in misery?” Marie challenged him.

“You don’t understand.” He turned away again. “Sons have a duty toward their fathers.”

“Yes, and now your duty is to manage his estate to the best of your ability and to live a life full of joy, since he and your brother cannot live that life anymore.”

“I can’t just be happy,” he started, turning back to her. His mouth worked to finish the thought, but no further words came out. “I can’t just be happy,” he repeated, making the words a single thought.

“You can,” Marie told him. “Death is a horrible thing, especially when it comes unexpectedly. But the only way to fight against death and to win is to live to the fullest in every moment you are given. You cannot bring your father and brother back, but you can honor them by enjoying every second you are given.”

“No.” He shook his head, then swallowed hard and started toward the hall. “I don’t deserve to be happy ever again.”

“Christian.” Marie chased after him, but the moment he reached the hallway, he strode swiftly toward the door. Fergus’s butler was ready and waiting for him and held the door so that Christian could escape out into the rainy morning.

Marie let out a breath and shook her head. Grief was never an easy thing. She’d experienced it twice before, when each of her parents died. Time was the only thing that cured grief, but

she was afraid time was something Christian wasn't willing to wait for. Not with his engagement to Lady Aoife still in place, nor with the shock of responsibility now heaped on him.

"My lady." Marie was startled out of her thoughts as the butler left the door after closing it behind Christian and strode down the long hall toward her. He glanced into the formal parlor as he passed it, then met Marie's eyes as he continued on. "My lady, you have guests in the formal parlor."

Marie blinked, wariness prickling its way down her back. "Guests? So early?"

"Lord Boleran and his sister, my lady," the butler reported.

Marie's brow rose even higher. It seemed as though her thoughts of Lady Aoife had summoned the woman. "Thank you, Mr. Connelly," she said stepping past him and heading toward the parlor.

A conversation was already underway between Lord Boleran and Shannon, but Marie caught the last of it as Shannon said, "He came to call on my brother, no doubt for advice about the running of his estate."

A strange twist filled Marie's stomach as she nodded politely to Lady Aoife and headed for one of the empty chairs. Halfway across the room, she changed her mind and went to sit on the sofa beside Lady Aoife instead.

"He could have come to me for advice," Lord Boleran told Shannon with a slight frown. "He's to be my brother-in-law soon."

"And why would anyone in their right mind ask your advice about anything?" Colleen snapped. She was glaring daggers at Lord Boleran, which made Marie wonder what sort of exchange they'd already had.

Lord Boleran appeared to be exercising extreme patience as he turned to Colleen and fixed her with a stern scowl. “I happen to have rescued my father’s estate from the edge of ruin when I inherited it five years ago, my lady,” he said through a clenched jaw.

“Rescued it, you say?” Colleen huffed as though that were impossible. “Was the estate stuck up a tree, like a cat?”

“Colleen,” Shannon warned her with a frown.

Chloe had a hand to her mouth in order to hide her giggling.

Colleen didn’t seem to notice either. “Do you fancy yourself a hero, Lord Boleran?”

Lord Boleran’s back was stiff as he replied, “I fancy myself a man of vision who takes his responsibilities seriously.”

“Very seriously, I’m sure,” Colleen said in a scathing voice.

Marie shifted her gaze back and forth between the two of them, increasingly baffled. She knew that Colleen had unusually strong feelings for the marquess. She was aware that the two of them had encountered each other on more than one occasion, at balls and local fetes and the like. But she’d had no idea that whatever connection existed between them could elicit the sort of sparks that flew between them now. Whether Colleen was aware of it or not, those sparks weren’t entirely adversarial.

“Please let me express my condolences for your loss yet again, Lady Marie,” Lady Aoife spoke softly at Marie’s side, almost as though she intended to start a side conversation while the others talked about their own business. No other

conversation began, though, so Lady Aoife was forced to speak with everyone listening to her. “If you are in need of proper mourning attire, I could give you the name of my seamstress in Ballymena.”

Marie fought down a surge of irritation and picked at the forest green skirt she wore. “Thank you, my lady, but my hope is that this old gown is sufficient for mourning a fiancé I barely knew.”

Lady Aoife’s pale face splashed with pink, and she looked away.

Marie didn’t try to hide her wince. “I’m sorry, Lady Aoife. I didn’t mean to snap.” She reached for Lady Aoife’s hand to squeeze it. “I know that your condolences are genuine. And you are right. I should don proper mourning attire because of my connection to the family.”

Lady Aoife seemed to forgive her. She lifted her face timidly to Marie and smiled. “It’s just that I feel responsible,” she said in a whisper.

Marie wanted to smirk at the word. “Responsible” was becoming a theme she couldn’t escape.

The others fell into a conversation about the rain, which gave Marie a chance to speak to Lady Aoife in relative privacy.

“Responsible?” Marie asked. Part of her hoped to draw the woman out. She couldn’t forget what she’d seen by the springhouse the day before.

“Because I’m...I’m to be the Countess of Kilrea soon,” Lady Aoife said, lowering her head and looking as miserable as if her fiancé was the one who had died.

Marie's heart thrummed with paradoxical excitement. "And this isn't something you want?" she asked cautiously. If she could get Lady Aoife to admit she was in love with Lord Garvagh, there was a chance she could have Christian—or even Lord Boleran—call the engagement off.

"What I want isn't important," Lady Aoife said, glancing wistfully toward one of the parlor's rain-streaked windows.

A thrill of triumph shot through Marie's gut. Lady Aoife obviously didn't want to marry Christian. Discovering that was the first step toward untangling the rest of the mess.

"I would think that your feelings on matters of love are highly important." Marie still held the woman's hand. She patted it, then clasped it in both of hers, showing as much warmth and friendship as she could.

"Marriage and love do not always go hand in hand," Lady Aoife said, dragging her eyes reluctantly back to Marie.

"But they should." Marie stared intently at her. She had to wring an admission from the woman, but she had to do it delicately. "You don't love Lord Kilrea." She phrased her question as a statement, hoping it would be easier for Lady Aoife to admit to it that way.

"I'm certain I will grow to love him in time," Lady Aoife said.

Marie took a deep breath to battle her frustration with the woman's answers. "He is a lovely man," she said slowly. "But perhaps not the loveliest of your acquaintance?"

A sudden, guilty look drew all color out of Lady Aoife's face. "Whether I find any man lovelier than the man I have been told I am to marry is irrelevant," she said, barely audible.

“But there is someone?” Marie practically vibrated with impatience. Why could the woman not just own up to her true feelings and take what she wanted?

Because women had been schooled for centuries to do as they were told and accept every sort of meddling in their lives, she answered herself. Because up until very recently, a woman’s feelings weren’t considered important at all, particularly not where marriage was concerned. Marie was beyond grateful that the mindset which had given birth to those horrible ideas was changing, even if it wasn’t changing fast enough.

“I will do as my brother tells me,” Lady Aoife said, evidently not willing to stand up for herself like a modern woman.

Frustration had Marie ready to leap out of her skin. How were women ever supposed to rise up to take their rightful place in the world when so many continued to see themselves as unworthy of something as simple as demanding to marry whomever they pleased?

“You’ll do as your brother says, even if it means you’ll be unhappy?” Marie asked subtly. She leaned closer to Lady Aoife. “Even if that means some other, worthier gentleman will be made unhappy by the decision as well?”

The look Lady Aoife gave her in response to the suggestion reminded Marie of a rabbit that had been cornered by a fox and knew it was about to be devoured. “I...I cannot imagine what you mean by that, Lady Marie,” she stammered.

The other conversation in the room stumbled to a halt, and all eyes turned to Marie and Lady Aoife. Which was no surprise to Marie. Lady Aoife looked as guilty as sin and ready to burst into tears.

“Aoife, are you well?” Lord Boleran asked, standing and putting aside the teacup he’d been holding. “Perhaps we should return home so that you can rest. My sister has a delicate constitution,” he said to Shannon by way of apology.

“Anyone who is forced to endure your presence on a daily basis would have a delicate constitution,” Colleen muttered, tilting her nose up.

Marie sent Colleen a scathing look and stood as Lady Aoife did. “If there is anything I can do to help you in any way, my lady,” she said. “If you ever need a friend to confide in, someone who might have been a sister to you.”

Lady Aoife smiled weakly at her, but rushed away as soon as her brother swept her from the room.

The next few minutes were spent bidding farewell to the guests. Marie bristled with frustration, even as she smiled and curtsied and pretended nothing was wrong. The moment Lady Aoife and Lord Boleran were gone, though, her sisters rounded on her.

“Whatever did you say to make Lady Aoife blanche so?” Chloe asked, as though she were asking Marie for the plot twist in the novel she was reading.

“She looked terrified enough to faint,” Shannon said with a far more pointed stare.

Marie returned to the sofa, flopping into it. “Everything is a muddle,” she said as her sisters sat around her.

“What sort of a muddle?” Colleen asked.

“A matrimonial muddle.” Marie sighed, then sat straighter. “Christian believes he’s still obligated to marry Lady Aoife, because it was his father’s last wish for him, even though he’s in love with me.”

“Oh,” Chloe said with a rapturous smile. “Did he confess that love for you? Was it glorious and romantic?”

“He did not confess it in so many words,” Marie said, feeling as though she’d missed out on what was her due, “but it’s true. And Lady Aoife still feels obligated to marry him, even though she’s in love with someone else as well.”

At that revelation, both Chloe and Colleen gasped.

“Who is Lady Aoife in love with?” Colleen asked.

“Lord Garvagh,” Marie said. “I spotted the two of them in an intimate conversation yesterday while on my way to call on Christian.” She tilted her head to the side, remembering the way Lady Aoife had looked as though she were in tears. “I think she’s as miserable about being forced to marry Christian as Christian is over what he thinks is his part in the accident.”

“But he didn’t cause the accident,” Colleen said. “Benedict might be a complete arse, but he knows of what he speaks when it comes to carriage wreckage.”

Marie, Shannon, and Chloe all turned to Colleen, and all three of them managed to ask in unison, “Benedict?”

Colleen’s face flushed puce. “Lord Boleran.” She cleared her throat. After a split-second of guilt, she burst into anger. “Oh, never you mind. You have your secrets and I have mine. But before you chastise me, I hate the man, and nothing half as wicked as what Marie and Lord Kilrea did has happened between the two of us.”

“But you wish it would,” Chloe said, then dissolved into giggling snorts.

The sisterly exchange was enough to send bursts of light through Marie’s whole body. Everything had changed, and yet some things would always remain the same. Her sisters were a

steady force that she could always rely on. They were bold, brave, and powerful when it came to determining their own futures.

She would be bold and brave too.

“I am not going to sit idly by and let four people’s lives be ruined by this foolish marriage,” she said, standing. “Lady Aoife is in love with Lord Garvagh. I am in love with Christian. If it’s the last thing I do, I am going to see that the right people marry each other, even if I have to break a hundred carriages to do so.”

“Perhaps that isn’t the right analogy for the time,” Shannon said in a scolding voice.

Marie’s cheeks heated. “Perhaps not, but my intention is the same. I am going to make things right, and I am going to start by convincing Christian that he deserves just as much love as any other man and all the happiness life can provide him.”

Ten



Unlike a large number of men of his acquaintance, Christian had never shied away from emotions, even intense ones. But as he sat beside his mother's bed, brushing her face lightly with a damp cloth to clean away the last traces of the broth the nurse had fed her for supper, he wondered if men who eschewed emotion had the right idea after all. His heart twisted in his chest at the sight of his proud, strong mother looking so frail. Her dark hair was streaked with grey and fanned out over the pillow, and her skin was pale and papery as she slumbered on. There had been a few encouraging signs that day, moments when it had almost seemed like she would awaken, but they'd come to naught.

The ache he felt at seeing how old and helpless his mother had become was nothing to the half dozen or more kinds of guilt he felt, though. The days-old guilt that lashed him over his part in the accident still throbbed deep in his chest, but newer, sharper forms of shame skated over top of that now. He shouldn't have shouted at Marie that morning. She was only trying to help him. He'd been too consumed with grief to allow that the world around him was still moving and happiness still existed. He felt guilty for experiencing a moment or two of that happiness. Being close to Marie had warmed parts of him that had frozen over. He felt horrible for

wanting more of that, wanting her. Which made him miserable, because he still believed he had a duty to marry Lady Aoife. Except, he now questioned whether he really had that duty or if it was just an echo of the way his father had always lashed out at him for being a terrible son. He didn't want to spend the rest of his life haunted by his father's ghost, but a large part of him still craved the man's approval.

"I don't know what to do, Mama," he whispered, putting the damp cloth aside and taking his mother's thin hand in both of his. "I just want to do the right thing, but it's become so muddled. I don't know what the right thing is anymore."

No answer came from his mother's prone form, but somehow Christian knew that his mother was full of advice, and that she wanted nothing more than to be able to give it to him. He longed painfully for the moment when he could hold his mother in his arms and the two of them could weep together over the loss of the other half of their family. Even if his father and Miles hadn't been open or loving with either him or his mother throughout their lives, they were still family, and they were still gone.

"My lord, if you don't mind, I'd like to settle Lady Kilrea for the night," the nurse spoke behind Christian.

Christian drew in a breath and stood. "Yes, of course. Thank you, Nurse Brannaugh."

He bent to kiss his mother's cheek, closing his eyes and saying a quick prayer for her, then straightened and backed away. For a few moments, he stood near the doorway, watching the nurse tend to his mother, but the sight pierced him with even more guilt. His actions were what had landed his mother in the state she was in now, after all.

He gave up watching and turned to leave, striding down the hall toward his bedroom in the other wing of the house. As he walked, he unbuttoned his jacket and waistcoat, loosened his tie, and tugged his shirt out of his trousers. By the time he reached his own room, shut the door, locked behind him, and lit a lamp, all it took was a few quick movements to toss his clothes aside. He sat in the chair by the empty fireplace to remove his shoes, then kicked off his trousers and drawers as well.

Once naked, he stood and crossed to his bedside table, where a half-empty bottle of whiskey from the night before still sat. He grabbed it and pulled out the cork with his teeth—like he used to do with any wine or spirits bottle that reached his hands while carousing his way through Europe—and tossed the cork on the table. He took a long draught that seared his throat and made him cough before wondering whether drowning his sorrows was really the best idea. At least the whiskey warmed his insides, which had felt numb since the accident.

He took one more swig before setting the bottle down and crossing back through his room to pick up the clothes he'd carelessly shed. There was no point in making more work for the poor sod who'd decided to be his valet. He didn't need a valet, but Gordon had worked for his father for years, and Christian felt yet another shade of guilt over the idea of sacking the man.

He'd gathered all of his clothes and tossed them into a hamper in his wardrobe when a sharp knocking made him jerk and whip toward the door, his brow shooting up. The knocking hadn't come from the door, though. After a second knock, he whipped the other way, only to discover it'd come from the window.

It was dark and dreary outside, and he'd only lit the one lamp. Even so, he could clearly make out the form of Marie on the other side of one of his bedroom windows. He gaped at her as he hurried across the room to unlatch the window and thrust it up.

“What in God’s name are you doing, woman? And how did you get up here?” he demanded. His heart ricocheted around his chest, and he couldn’t decide if he was happy to see her, shocked that she was at his window, or furious with her for being there in the first place.

“My, my,” she said, her wide eyes sweeping his naked form. “You do like to walk about in the altogether, don’t you, Lord Kilrea?”

The urge to laugh bubbled up in him so quickly that the effort to suppress that laughter made him dizzy. “A gentleman can walk about naked in his own bedroom,” he said, then rushed on to, “How did you know which room was mine, and for God’s sake, what are you doing on that ladder?”

“You’re answering your own questions, you know,” Marie told him, pushing him back and climbing up the last few rungs of the ladder that she’d brought from heaven only knew where to reach his window.

She hoisted her leg gracelessly over his windowsill and pulled herself into the room. At the same time that she reached for him, probably to steady herself, Christian stepped back, intent on giving her the room she needed to climb in. The result was that she lost her balance with a muffled shriek and tumbled to the floor, arms and legs sprawled. She groaned, though Christian couldn’t tell if it was from embarrassment or injury.

“What sort of hellion brings a ladder to an earl’s house and climbs through his window in the middle of the night?” Christian asked, finding her shoulders in the tangle of skirts and limbs and hefting her to her feet.

“A wicked one,” Marie answered, meeting his eyes with a fiery look. “And it’s not the middle of the night. It’s barely ten o’clock. There are parties throughout the county that are only just beginning at this hour.”

“Parties you should be attending rather than being here.” Christian knew that he should turn her around and push her toward the window so she could climb out again and be on her way. At the very least, he should take his hands off her and step back. He couldn’t seem to do either, though. All he could manage was to hold her and rake her with a gaze.

She returned that assessing, head-to-toe gaze, and she had far more to look at than he did. Her mouth twitched up in one corner. “You truly are the nakedest man I’ve ever known,” she said.

“What are you doing here, Marie?” he asked before her mischievous humor could trick him out of all the guilt and sorrow he should rightfully be feeling.

“I’m here to save several lives,” she said with a triumphant grin. For a moment, she rested her hands on his arms, then moved them to his sides, then quickly slid them to his chest, leaving tendrils of desire pulsing through him. A heartbeat after that, she pulled her hands away entirely and stepped away from him. “I’ve no idea where to put my hands, and I cannot think at all with them anywhere on your body,” she said, deliberately turning to one side. “I cannot look at you either.” As soon as she said that, she cheated her eyes back to him, focusing on his cock—which wasn’t as flaccid as it

should have been. “Strike that. I cannot help *but* look at you,” she went on, her lips twitching into a saucy grin. A grin that she instantly stifled. “No, it’s best if I avert my eyes.”

She turned fully away from him.

“You still haven’t told me what you’re doing here,” Christian said. He put on as stern an expression as he could manage, but his heart overflowed and excited energy coursed through him, whether he wanted it to or not. He considered going to his wardrobe to fetch a robe, but stubborn pride kept him glued to his spot. At least, he hoped it was stubborn pride and not a far cheekier sort of satisfaction that came from knowing she liked the look of him. Or that he enjoyed how it felt to have her look.

Marie tensed for a moment before letting that tension out with a breath as she turned to him. “You cannot marry Lady Aoife. She doesn’t love you. She loves Lord Garvagh instead. And you love me.” She paused, but before he could launch into an explanation of why none of that mattered, she added, “And I love you.”

Those words hit him far harder than Christian anticipated. Marie loved him. Of course, he knew she loved him, but to hear her say it, plainly and honestly, was like an arrow piercing his heart. Except, instead of taking his life away, that arrow infused him with life and purpose.

He didn’t dare entertain those feelings, though.

“Love is inconvenient at the moment,” he said, gesturing helplessly. He must have looked especially helpless, saying as much while stark naked and on display for her. “I’m terribly sorry that Lady Aoife’s heart longs for someone else, but—”

“Don’t you dare tell me you have to marry the poor woman anyhow, just because your father wanted it,” Marie rode over him, taking a hard step toward him. The intensity of her glower was enough to shock Christian right out of the certainties that he knew to be true. “I can account for your confused thinking because you are grieving, but if you persist in marrying the woman, knowing she’s in love with Lord Garvagh and you are in love with me, then you’re a bigger fool than I thought it was possible for you to be.”

He wanted to argue with her. He wanted to spout volumes about duty and honor, his father, family legacies, and so on. Except that he didn’t. He didn’t want to argue at all. He didn’t want to marry Lady Aoife, he wanted to marry Marie. He wanted it so badly that it made every fiber of his being burn.

With paradoxical coolness that he didn’t truly feel, he asked, “What am I supposed to do about it? The betrothal has already been made.”

“We aren’t living in some medieval society, where oaths are bound in blood and where wars are started because of broken engagements, Christian,” Marie told him, crossing her arms and shaking her head. “You are the most dramatic man I’ve ever met. Nudity, pranks, wallowing in sorrow.”

“I love you, Marie, but I’m not going to stand here and listen to you mock me like this,” Christian replied.

A sudden, wide grin split Marie’s face. Her eyes danced like leaves in the summer breeze and her cheeks went as pink as the sunrise. “You love me,” she said. It was a repetition of his own words, but it was a way of calling him out as well. “I knew it,” she went on, tilting her chin up haughtily. “I knew that underneath all that hurt your heart was still beating.”

She was still mocking him, but that didn't mean she was wrong. The shell of grief and horror that had closed in around him after the accident began to crack and break away, letting the sunshine of the love he felt for her peek through.

It would have been so easy to give in to that love. The man he'd been a week ago would have thrown himself headlong into it. But he'd changed in the last week. He'd grown up, and he had to take responsibility for himself and others.

“Are you absolutely certain that Lady Aoife is in love with Lord Garvagh?” he asked seriously, stepping toward her. Only a few inches separated them, but he restrained himself from reaching for her.

“I am as certain of it as I can be,” she said, equally serious. “I tried to get her to confess this morning, but she wouldn't let go of what I suppose is loyalty to you. Or perhaps to her brother, whose wish it is that you marry. Though heaven only knows why the man is so determined to see his sister wed.”

Christian frowned. “That's not enough to make a decision this important. It's not enough evidence to break an engagement.”

Marie let out a sigh of frustration that was almost comical in its intensity. “Are you still so stubborn that you're demanding proof of Lady Aoife's love?”

“Yes,” Christian answered with a shrug. On the one hand, he couldn't, in good conscience, go against what his father and Lord Boleran had set up. On the other, seeing Marie aggravated and ready to tear into him lit a fire inside of him that he'd sorely missed. He wanted to feel again, desire again, and she was well on her way to granting that wish.

“Fine,” Marie huffed, either not seeing how she was affecting him or enjoying the game as much as he was beginning to. “We’ll prove that Lady Aoife and Lord Garvagh are in love and that everyone would be much happier if they were allowed to marry.”

“How?” Christian planted his hands on his hips, secretly hoping the gesture would draw Marie’s attention to his quickly-growing arousal.

“We’ll play a prank on them,” she said. “So to speak. We’ll find a way to get the two of them alone together and....” Her words faded as her gaze dropped to his groin. Her already pink cheeks grew redder, and her eyes sparkled with hunger. A naughty smile spread across her lips, and she bit one, as if contemplating how she could take a bite out of him.

Christian cleared his throat, his pulse kicking up.

Marie drew in a breath and forced her eyes to meet his. “Sorry. What was I saying?”

“Something about getting two lovers alone,” Christian said, grinning. Lord help him, he was actually grinning. For what felt like the first time in years.

Marie met that grin, fire flickering in her eyes. “That’s right. We get Lady Aoife and Lord Garvagh alone. In...in the springhouse.” Her expression brightened with an entirely different kind of mischief. She paced to one side. “We come up with a way to trap them in the springhouse. That way, they’ll be forced to confess their love for each other.”

“Forced,” Christian repeated with a mock serious nod. He loved watching the gears turn in Marie’s brain, loved watching her get carried away on the wings of a mad-capped scheme. It

made him want to run away with her. It made him want to be happy.

“Once they confess their love, it should be easy for you to break the engagement,” she went on before stopping her pacing and her explanation with a gasp. “I know! Oh, Christian, it’s pure brilliance.”

“Yes, it is,” he said, admiring the light that seemed to surround her. He paused, then said, “What is?”

She strode toward him, closing the distance between them. “This is more than a way to unite Lady Aoife and Lord Garvagh in true love. This is a way to resolve your property dispute as well.”

For a moment Christian frowned. “It is?”

“Yes.” Marie clasped his arms, sending spears of fire through him that settled in his groin. “Don’t you see? You can offer Lord Garvagh Lady Aoife’s hand in marriage in exchange for the property rights your families have been disputing for so long.”

Christian arched one eyebrow doubtfully. “Now who’s being the medieval one? Brides are not bartered for land anymore.”

“I know, but my guess is that Lord Garvagh will be so grateful to you for releasing Lady Aoife from her engagement that he’ll give you whatever you want.”

“Will you give me whatever I want?” he asked. The question surprised him, and for a moment, they both blinked in shock.

Then Marie let out a breath and shifted her arms to rest over his shoulders. “Oh, yes, Christian. I will give you whatever you want and then some.”

She surged into him, slanting her mouth over his. Every reasonable voice within him said he should push her off, cast her aside, and go about life the way a serious, stoic gentleman in the midst of an incalculable loss should. For a change, he didn't listen to a single one of those voices. He wanted Marie wrapped around him. He wanted her under him. He wanted to be inside of her. He wanted her in his life forever.

He kissed her back, not caring about anything else but the sweet taste of her mouth and the way her tongue tangled with his when he thrust his into her. She accepted him with a moan of longing that sizzled through his blood and had him hard in seconds. Her fingers combed through his hair as he fumbled for the fastenings of her skirts and whatever other parts of her he could reach to undress her as quickly as possible.

“I love you, Marie,” he said between desperate kisses. “I love you more than I know.”

He wasn't sure if his words made sense. What did make sense was the way her skin felt against his as they worked together to remove her clothes and move to his bed.

“You can make fun of me for enjoying nudity as much as you want,” he panted as he unclasped her corset while she fumbled awkwardly to unlace her boots—two actions he wouldn't have thought were possible at the same time. “But you must admit, it's a damned sight more convenient than all these clothes.”

“I'll never wear clothes again,” Marie vowed as they tangled and flopped their way through undressing her.

It was madness—so much that he found himself laughing as one of her boots got stuck in his bedcovers before she could remove it and as her chemise ripped when he tried to pull it over her head. Undressing was chaos, but they managed to

accomplish enough of it to slide their bodies together with absolute bliss.

“Oh, God, this feels so good,” she sighed as he stroked his hands along her sides and nibbled at her neck.

“So good,” he echoed, grinding his erection against her hip.

He wanted to touch her everywhere at once. He wanted every part of his body in contact with every part of hers. He cupped one of her breasts and brought his mouth down to suckle her nipple, eliciting sounds from her that had his balls drawn up tight with expectation. She tasted of salt and wonder, and the way she wriggled under him as he teased her to greater heights of pleasure was better than anything he'd ever experienced before. He switched to her other breast, rolling her abandoned nipple between his fingers and thumb as he suckled the other, then pinched lightly.

Her response was electric. She cried out wordlessly, arching into him. He didn't know how he was going to hold out long enough not to embarrass himself with his lack of control. Her response to the way he kissed across the flat of her stomach and explored between her legs left him hot and throbbing.

“Christian,” she panted his name as he pushed her thighs apart and kissed the inside of first one, then the other. “That's...that's...ohh!”

He drew a deep cry out of her as he explored her with his lips and tongue. She was so eager for him that he had to grip her thighs tightly and hold them apart so that he could tease her clitoris with his tongue. Something told him that she liked the way he handled her forcefully as much as she enjoyed what his lips and tongue were doing. That something resolved

into a deep gasp and a cry as her body convulsed in orgasm at his touch.

It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever experienced, and he wanted to experience all of it. He repositioned himself as fast as he could, thrusting into her with a satisfied cry, then holding himself within her for a moment. The sensation of her inner muscles squeezing and milking him was too much to resist. He moved decisively within her, feeling his control shatter with lightning speed. All he wanted to do was be one with her, now and always. All his heart longed for was to spill himself inside of her and to feel whole again.

He came with a thunderous jolt of pleasure, his whole focus narrowing into the pleasure that coursed through them both as he emptied himself inside of her. It was magical beyond telling, filling him with life and joy. The feelings were so wildly perfect that as soon as the bliss of orgasm began to subside, he lost every last ounce of energy he'd been holding onto and collapsed half on top of her.

"I love you so," she panted, embracing him with her arms and legs and sighing in contentment. "You are mine, and don't you ever forget it."

"I won't," he promised hazily, already feeling the weight of sleep descend on him.

And there was another shade of guilt he hadn't yet experienced. He was a cad for falling asleep minutes after coming inside of her. But for the first time in days, his heart and soul felt light. For the first time, he felt safe, as though everything would be all right after all. It wasn't an insult to her that he drifted off quickly, it was the greatest compliment he could possibly give.

Eleven



Marie had won. She knew it as certainly as she knew she loved the sound of Christian's deep, sated breathing as he slumbered after making love to her. She knew it like she knew that, come what may, the two of them would be together for the rest of their lives and all of eternity beyond. She could feel that the spell of grief that had trapped Christian in its web was breaking and that he would soon be thinking like himself again.

She also knew that there was still work to be done.

She woke Christian briefly, deep into the night, whispering to him that she had to return home before anyone suspected anything, but to have Lord Garvagh in place by the springhouse early the next afternoon. Christian was still so exhausted that all he did was hum and nod and let her kiss him soundly—then kiss him again when that kiss proved to not be enough—then tiptoed back to his window and climbed down to where her bicycle was waiting. She'd let Christian's servants discover the ladder against the window the next morning and think what they would. Perhaps a new hint of scandal would be just the thing she needed to push Christian over the edge into chasing his own matrimonial desires instead of sticking to his father's ridiculous idea of a match.

By sheer force of luck, Marie was able to return home and sneak up to her bedroom in the wee hours of the night without anyone spotting her. She tried to sleep once she was home free, but her mind wouldn't let her. It turned over her plans to force Lady Aoife and Lord Garvagh together, and once she was certain her plot was fool-proof, it buzzed on with ideas for how she and Christian could be married as soon as possible, in spite of the strictures of mourning that Christian was obligated to observe for his father and brother. When she finally did fall asleep as the first rays of dawn were peeking over the horizon, it was with a smile on her face.

“Did you enjoy your lie-in?” Shannon asked late the next morning, a knowing grin pulling at her mouth, when Marie joined her sisters in their family parlor.

“I did,” Marie answered with a happy sigh.

“I'm sure she especially enjoyed the lying part,” Colleen added with a smirk, stabbing a needle into the embroidery she was working on.

Marie didn't even try to pretend her sisters had the wrong way of things. “If you'll excuse me,” she said after striding across the room to pluck a scone from the tea tray sitting on a table between Shannon and Chloe. “I have a very important call to make.”

“Let me venture a guess,” Shannon said. “Are you about to grace Lord Kilrea with your company?” She arched one eyebrow.

“I'd wager she already did that and more last night,” Colleen muttered.

Marie's sisters exchanged looks that dissolved into mischievous giggles.

“For your information,” Marie said, biting into her scone, then chewing to heighten the expectation of the moment. She hadn’t realized how hungry she was or how good the scone would be, but she went on regardless with, “I am paying a call on Lady Aoife.”

“How curious,” Shannon said, looking as though she genuinely meant it. She darted a look to Colleen, then said, “Be sure to pay your respects to her brother on Colleen’s behalf while you’re there.”

“You will not!” Colleen snapped, face flushing.

“If you do, tell me everything about how Lord Boleran looked when you gave him Colleen’s regards,” Chloe said, stars in her eyes.

“You will do no such thing,” Colleen nearly shouted.

“I doubt I’ll have time to see Lord Boleran at all,” Marie said, finishing her scone as she strode across the room to the door. “Although I have it on good authority someone will need to pay a call on him later today to explain why his sister’s engagement has been called off.” She flickered her eyebrows cunningly.

Shannon sat straighter with an impish glint in her eyes. “Good heavens, you aren’t thinking of running off with Lady Aoife yourself, are you?”

Marie laughed at her sister’s teasing and headed out to the hall. If she had her way, Lord Garvagh would do the running off with Lady Aoife before the afternoon was over.

It took no time at all for her to fetch her bicycle from the stables and to ride the handful of miles to Boleran Hall. By the time she reached the grand and modern estate, it was lunchtime. The day was unusually sunny and bright, and as it

had the added advantage of being balmy, Marie wasn't surprised at all to find Lady Aoife taking her luncheon outside on a lovely patio that stood in the middle of a well-tended rose garden. The sky was a vibrant blue, the grass around the garden was vivid in its shades of green, and the roses burst forth in every color from red to coral to yellow, sending the most delicious scents into the air. The only colorless, drab thing in the picture was Lady Aoife herself.

"Lady Marie, this is a surprise," Lady Aoife said, rising uneasily from her luncheon table and adjusting her black skirts so that not a wrinkle showed. "Have you...have you come to dine with me?" The poor woman looked genuinely flabbergasted and disturbed by Marie's presence. Though that might have had something to do with the letter that lay open on the table beside her plate. She snatched it up and folded it hastily, tucking it into the waistband of her skirt.

"I've not come to dine," Marie said, feigning an air of urgency that was part of her plan. That act faltered for a moment as she glanced across the deliciously pink ham and herb-sprinkled vegetables on Lady Aoife's plate. Her stomach growled, but there was no time to stop and eat. She took a step toward Lady Aoife, reaching for her hands. "Lady Aoife, my dear friend. I need you to come with me at once."

"Come with you?" Lady Aoife blinked rapidly, her face coloring. "Is something the matter? Is it...is it Lady Kilrea?"

Marie had planned to use a different excuse—one involving a puppy in need of help—but if Lady Aoife wanted to write her own script for the prank, then Marie would go along with it.

"Yes," she said. "You must come with me to Kilrea Manor at once."

“Of course.” Lady Aoife stepped away from her lunch, following Marie quickly and willingly as they crossed through the rose garden to the side of the house where Marie had left her bicycle. “Has she expired?” Lady Aoife asked, her voice high and tight. “Or has she recovered?”

“There’s no time to lose,” Marie said, hurrying on.

“Should I prepare myself? How is Lord Kilrea faring?” Lady Aoife wrung her hands, looking genuinely distressed.

Marie frowned over the woman’s concern. It was ridiculous for her to think she was the only one who had a right to worry about Christian, but she allowed herself that bit of ridiculousness. Christian was hers, and soon the world would know it. “You’ll see,” she said.

“Should I have a carriage brought around? Should I inform my brother that things have taken a turn?”

They reached the side of the house and Marie’s bicycle. Frustration got the best of her. Of all the times for Lady Aoife to suddenly start talking and asking questions.

“We’ll take my bicycle,” she said, grabbing the handlebars and pulling it around to point toward the drive.

“Both of us?” Lady Aoife balked. Of course she would.

“Yes. You can ride on the handlebars.”

For a moment, Marie thought Lady Aoife’s eyes would pop clean out of her head. “How is that even possible?”

“It’s easy,” Marie told her. “I rode on the handlebars last week while Christian pedaled.”

Her careless remark earned a look of shock and suspicion from Lady Aoife. A light of understanding came into the woman’s eyes, but before she could come close to saying

anything about it, Marie growled and said, “Hurry. Time is wasting. It’s a simple matter of climbing up, sitting here—” she patted the cross-section of the handlebars, “—and keeping your skirts out of the way.”

Lady Aoife didn’t look at all convinced, but she followed Marie’s instructions and climbed onto the handlebars all the same. As it turned out, it was neither simple nor easy to ride a bicycle with someone sitting on the handlebars. Christian must have been some sort of miracle worker to make it look as easy as he had. It took Lady Aoife several attempts to balance and Marie several more to propel the bicycle forward before they were on their way down the drive.

Even then, the journey proved a thousand times more arduous than Marie had accounted for. Every time she pedaled fast enough to help balance the bicycle and its load, Lady Aoife began to scream in panic. In doing so, she shifted her weight on the handlebar, making Marie fight to maintain balance and momentum. They nearly crashed four times, but Marie was fiercely determined to keep going.

In the end, the difficulty of the ride aided the overall deception Marie had planned.

“That’s it. We cannot go on like this,” she panted with genuine frustration as they reached a portion of the road that was within sight of the springhouse. “I need to rest.”

“I don’t think I could go on either,” Lady Aoife agreed, pressing a shaking hand to her chest as she slipped off the handlebars and staggered to one side.

Marie scrambled for something to say, scanning the area around the springhouse to see if Christian had followed through with his part in the deception. She nearly shouted for joy when she spotted him and Lord Garvagh striding toward

the springhouse from a hill closer to Lord Garvagh's property. Her relief was quickly eclipsed by alarm, though. Lady Aoife couldn't see Lord Garvagh before they were ready to spring the trap.

"Good Lord, have you ripped your skirt?" she asked, nudging Lady Aoife to turn so that her back was toward the springhouse and the men.

"I don't think so," Lady Aoife said. "I was sure to be careful and held my skirts as close as I could."

"I'm certain I heard a tear, though." Marie bent to grab the hem of Lady Aoife's skirt, then proceeded to check every inch of the fabric of both the skirt and the petticoat underneath.

She plucked and fussed and did whatever she could to keep Lady Aoife distracted. When she had the woman vexed to the point of madness, Marie glanced toward the springhouse. She was just in time to see Christian open the door and invite Lord Garvagh to enter ahead of him. Christian glanced in Marie's direction as he did, but the distance was too great for Marie to see what sort of expression he wore.

Once Christian followed Lord Garvagh into the springhouse and shut the door behind them, Marie stepped away from Lady Aoife. "I must have been mistaken," she said. She wiped her brow with the back of her hand. "Would you mind if we stopped at the springhouse for a drink of cool water? I could use it."

"Yes, I believe I could use some refreshment as well," Lady Aoife said, fanning herself, lips pursed. "As long as it won't delay us from reaching Lady Kilrea's bedside as swiftly as possible."

“It won’t,” Marie lied. She picked up her bicycle from where she’d let it drop by the side of the road and wheeled it toward the nearest stand of bushes. “I think I’ll just leave Lucifer here for the moment.”

“Lucifer?” Lady Aoife’s brow shot up in alarm. “I was riding on a contraption named Lucifer?”

“It’s a fitting name, no?” Marie teased her as they walked through the grass following the path of the spring.

Lady Aoife didn’t answer. Or rather, her wary, sideways look was all the answer Marie needed.

The closer they drew to the springhouse, the more anxious Marie grew about her plan. As she’d detailed it to Christian briefly before leaving him the night before, they would trap Lady Aoife and Lord Garvagh in the old stone structure together for as long as it took them to declare their love. The details of that plan, however, were sketchy at best, now that Marie was faced with the moment of truth. Getting Lady Aoife to enter the springhouse might not be that hard, but getting Christian out without being seen, so that Lady Aoife and Lord Garvagh could be alone and believe they were not being spied upon was another entirely.

There didn’t seem to be any way to proceed but to charge on once they reached the springhouse.

“Oh, dear.” Marie stopped within a few yards of the door. “My lace seems to have come loose.” She crouched and pretended to fiddle with her boot. “Go on in without me.” She gestured for Lady Aoife to proceed.

To Marie’s surprise, Lady Aoife only hesitated for a moment before shaking her head as though she were supremely perturbed and pulling open the springhouse door.

Marie held her breath, waiting and hoping everything would go to plan, as Lady Aoife stepped over the threshold.

“Oh! Ned! What are you doing here?” Lady Aoife’s voice sounded from the echoing inside of the old building.

At the same time, Christian popped his head around the edge of the stone wall. His expression was neutral and his face was still paler than it should have been, but his eyes sparkled with curiosity.

That was all the provocation Marie needed. She leapt into action, lunging for the springhouse door and shutting it with a loud thunk. “Oh, no!” she called out with as much feigned distress as she could. “I seem to have stumbled into the door. I think it’s wedged shut.”

Marie gestured for Christian. He sped forward, joining her at the door and throwing his weight against it. When someone on the other side tried to push it open, Christian held it shut.

“It does appear to be stuck,” Lord Garvagh said. “Let me try—”

Christian and Marie both braced themselves hard against the door as Lord Garvagh attempted to throw his own weight into it. The blow Lord Garvagh delivered to the door was bruising. Marie hoped and prayed that she and Christian together would be strong enough to keep it shut.

“Stand back a moment,” Marie called through to their prisoners. “Let me see if I can just get this to....” She let her words fade and gestured for Christian to fetch the wedges she’d asked him to bring to keep the door stuck tight.

Thankfully, Christian had grasped what she intended for the prank. He darted to the side and took four sturdy wedges that he’d evidently placed around the corner of the building

earlier. As he fetched them, Marie noticed his trousers were soaked from the knees down.

“If I could just—” Marie pretended to be studying the door as Christian pounded the first wedge into place at the bottom of the door. “It just needs a little—” He followed by securing two more wedges between the side of the door and its frame. “Perhaps a bit of—” Finally, he finished by knocking the last wedge into place at the top of the door. “There,” Marie said. “Try now.”

She and Christian stood back, holding their breaths. Christian reached for Marie’s hand, grasping it tightly. A moment later, a hard thump sounded from the other side of the door as Lord Garvagh threw his weight into it. He tried a second time, then a third. The door didn’t budge.

“Whatever you’ve done seems to have made it worse, Lady Marie,” Lord Garvagh’s grumbling voice said.

“Oh, dear,” Marie said with a smile as broad as the ocean.

“Whatever are we going to do?” Lady Aoife asked.

“Lady Marie, you must find Lord Kilrea at once,” Lord Garvagh commanded. “He was here minutes ago. He climbed down through the spring door with the intent of showing me a feature he has plans to install, but he seems to have disappeared.”

“How very odd,” Marie said, sending Christian an impish grin.

Surprisingly, Christian met her wicked look with a smile of his own. It was weaker than what she felt it could be, but after days in which the only expression she’d seen on Christian’s face was misery—or transportation, as she’d seen briefly the

night before—the expression and the light it brought to him were priceless.

“Hurry,” Lord Garvagh charged her. “Lady Aoife is greatly distressed.”

“And we cannot have that,” Marie said under her breath, sending a victorious look to Christian. “I’ll run as fast as I can,” she called into the springhouse. “In the meantime, are you certain you’ll be all right completely alone, without a soul nearby to hear you, unchaperoned?”

Christian swatted at her arm, as though he thought she was laying it on too thick.

“We’ll manage,” Lord Garvagh said. There was an intimacy to his tone that had Marie’s pulse racing in victory.

“All right. I’m going now,” Marie called out.

Still holding Christian’s hand, she moved away from the door. Rather than leaving to head up to the manor house, she and Christian walked around the corner to the side of the building where the spring ran down from the hill. The spring sank underground several yards away from the building, which meant a flat patch of grass stretched along that side. It was the perfect place for Marie and Christian to stand with their backs pressed against the stone wall, listening to whatever conversation would happen inside through the thin and patchy roof.

It took a few seconds in which all they could hear was movement from inside the building before Lady Aoife sighed and said, “How long are we going to be trapped here?”

“It shouldn’t be long,” Lord Garvagh told her. “Lord Kilrea only just left, moments before you arrived.”

“I’m surprised the man isn’t more concerned about where you’ve gone,” Marie whispered to Christian.

“I believe he has other concerns at the moment,” Christian whispered back.

“Aoife, there’s no need to look so distressed,” Lord Garvagh went on in a tender voice. “We won’t be trapped here for long. Even if the door is stuck, we could still climb out through the spring door below, or through the roof.” There was a pause in which Marie could just make out the sound of Lord Garvagh walking across the creaking floorboards inside the building. “I’d no idea the roof was in such dire need of repair.”

“At least it lets the light in,” Lady Aoife said in a tremulous voice.

More creaking followed, then Lord Garvagh said, “I mean it, Aoife. There’s nothing to be afraid of. I’m here. I’ll keep you safe.”

“But don’t you understand, Ned, this is a sign.” Judging by the slightly muffled sound of Lady Aoife’s words, Marie was convinced Lord Garvagh had embraced her. She sent a triumphant look to Christian, whose entire countenance was filling with mirth as the scene played out. “This is a punishment.”

“A punishment for what, love?” Lord Garvagh asked in the most tender voice Marie had ever heard from the man.

“For loving where we shouldn’t,” Lady Aoife went on. “For disobeying my brother and wishing things were other than they are.”

“Your loyalty to your brother is admirable, sweetling,” Lord Garvagh said, “but as I’ve told you so many times before, it is misplaced. Benedict was wrong to betroth you to a

man you do not love when a man who does love you is right here.”

“Oh, Ned.”

“I wish you’d let me tell him I was the one he saw creeping out of the crofter’s cottage that night,” Lord Garvagh went on. Marie’s brow shot up. “Then this whole tangle wouldn’t have happened.”

“I couldn’t bear it if he harmed you, Ned.” Lady Aoife’s plaintive words were followed by a heavy stillness and the faintest sounds of movement.

Marie turned to Christian, eyes wide, barely able to suppress her laughter. “They’re kissing,” she mouthed, pointing at the wall.

Instead of smiling and laughing along with her, Christian’s face crumpled into sorrow and defeat. He slumped against the wall, scrubbing his hands over his face.

Marie shifted to stand in front of him, her feet braced on either side of his. “What’s wrong?” she whispered, taking his hands away from his face.

“I’ve been such an idiot,” Christian admitted in a hushed voice. “You tried to tell me those two were in love and I was too blinded by grief to listen. You tried to tell me a lot of things.”

“This isn’t right,” Lady Aoife said with a burst of energy inside the spring house. “We shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Yes, we should,” Lord Garvagh insisted. Marie was fairly certain Lady Aoife had tried to pull away and he’d stopped her, perhaps even pulled her back into his arms. “I love you, Aoife. I am the only man who has a right to marry you.”

Marie planted her hands against the wall on either side of Christian's shoulders. She arched one eyebrow and nodded to the building, as if seconding what Lord Garvagh had said for herself where Christian was concerned.

"We've waited far too long to declare ourselves," Lord Garvagh went on. "If we'd been bold enough to tell the world what we wanted from the beginning, we wouldn't be in this bind."

"If I'd put my foot down when my father insisted I marry her," Christian echoed, resting his hands on Marie's waist.

"It's not too late," Marie told him.

"But look at the mess we're in now," Lady Aoife said. "We've defied duty, and now look. We're trapped in here."

"Only for the time being," Lord Garvagh said.

"But so much tragedy has occurred," Lady Aoife insisted. "I cannot help but believe old Lord Kilrea and Lord Agivey's deaths are divine retribution for the night of passion we spent together."

Marie's brow shot up so fast that it made her dizzy. She pressed her lips tightly shut to keep from bursting with laughter. It seemed she wasn't the only wicked woman in County Antrim after all. She never would have guessed Lady Aoife had it in her.

Christian's expression was still pained, though, and his shoulders slumped.

Marie opened her mouth to speak, but miraculously, Lord Garvagh beat her to it by saying, "God doesn't punish us for love. Or for disobedience about something as small as ill-advised betrothals. The divine wants us to be happy in all things."

“But the accident,” Lady Aoife tried to go on.

“Accidents happen,” Lord Garvagh said. “They just do. Without any rhyme or reason. They aren’t meted out as punishment for our sins. They are unfortunate coincidences, and we cannot throw away any chance we have for happiness because the world is an imperfect place. Daring to be happy in the face of tragedy is what gives life its meaning.”

Marie clasped the sides of Christian’s face as Lord Garvagh spoke, staring intensely into Christian’s eyes. Her heart echoed every word Lord Garvagh spoke and then some.

“It was not your fault,” she whispered, tears stinging at her eyes as emotion rushed in on Christian like a hurricane.

Christian nodded. It was a tiny movement, all things considered, but it carried within it a surrender that seemed to set Christian free. His eyes were still filled with grief and his face pinched with a fresh wave of pain, but everything else about him felt lighter, lifted up.

The extended silence from inside the springhouse hinted to Marie that Lady Aoife and Lord Garvagh were kissing again, and she’d be damned if they were the only ones. She leaned into Christian, slanting her mouth over his and pouring her heart and soul into kissing him. His arms surrounded her at once, his hands spreading across her back. He straightened, strength rushing back into him as he caressed her mouth with his and explored her with his lips and tongue. If Lord Garvagh kissed Lady Aoife half as passionately as Christian kissed her, the entire springhouse might burn down.

“I love you,” Christian whispered as he rained light kisses across her cheeks and chin. Marie tilted her head back so that he could nip and lick her neck. “I love you so much, Marie. I’m sorry I even considered marrying someone else.”

“I knew you would never go through with it,” Marie replied, eager to have his mouth on hers again. “And I know you’ve been grieving. So it’s easy to forgive you.”

“I’m sorry all the same,” he said. They stopped trying to keep their voices down.

Marie pulled away from him, taking a step back. She briefly registered something not right about the grass under her feet, but that was the least of her worries at the moment. “It’s all over now,” she said, grasping his hand as if to pull him away from the springhouse wall and taking another step back. “Let’s let them out of the trap and get everyone engaged to who they’re supposed to be engaged to.” She flickered one eyebrow. “And then we can go up to the house and—”

She didn’t have a chance to finish her sentence. As she took another step back, a loud crack sounded under her, and the ground gave way, plunging her downward.

Twelve



Christian grasped and scrambled, but he wasn't fast enough to maintain his grip on Marie's hand as she plunged into what seemed like a hole in the ground. She screamed sharply, but a hollow splash quickly drowned out the sound.

"Marie!" Christian started forward, but wheeled back when another crack sounded and the ground under him tilted. He leapt to the side in time to avoid tumbling into the spring as another section of the ground collapsed.

In a flash, he realized what had happened. The spring didn't simply disappear into the ground before entering the springhouse. Someone had built a deep channel to direct the water and covered it with floorboards of some sort. Only, the construction had been done so long ago that grass had grown up over the boards. If enough time had passed since that had happened, it was as like as not that the boards had rotted. So when Marie put her full weight on them, they gave out, plunging her into the stream.

All of those thoughts happened in a split second. Christian twisted as soon as he hit solid ground beside the collapsed section of boards and grass, scrambling to the dank chasm that had been uncovered.

“Marie!” he shouted louder, desperate to find any trace of her. There was no telling how deep the spring was at that point or what sort of debris might be trapping Marie underwater.

“Kilrea, is that you?” Ned’s voice boomed inside the springhouse.

Christian barely registered his question. “Marie’s fallen into the spring,” he called out, tearing away whatever boards he could get his hands on in an effort to reach her. The boards were so rotted that they crumbled in his hands rather than giving him splinters.

Banging sounded from inside the springhouse, but Christian hardly heard it.

“Christian!” Marie’s watery, strangled cry came from somewhere far below.

“I’ve got you, Marie,” he called to her, doubling his efforts to move boards and rend the earth to reach her.

“Christian, I can’t hold on,” Marie cried back. The fear in her voice had the hair on the back of Christian’s neck standing up.

“I’ve got you,” he repeated, though his heart trembled with uncertainty.

He tried to think fast, tried to remember what he knew of the springhouse and what he’d seen just minutes before. If Marie let go of whatever she was holding onto, would she sail right underneath the structure and come out the other side, or were there gratings or other obstructions that would trap her underwater?

A loud crack split the air, and a moment later, Ned and Lady Aoife dashed around the corner of the springhouse. Ned

leapt right over the gaping hole left by the broken boards and dropped to a crouch on the other side.

“What happened? Did she fall through?” Ned asked.

Christian nodded, giving Ned only a cursory look. “The boards gave out,” he said, pulling more away.

“Can I help?” Lady Aoife asked, moving forward and heading toward a section of the grass that Christian expected hid more unstable boards.

“Stand back, love,” Ned warned her sharply, then bent to tear at the old boards with Christian.

“I’m slipping,” Marie gasped below them. “It’s all wet and slippery, and—oh!”

Christian tore aside just the right board and spotted her in the nick of time. He lunged for her, closing a hand around her wrist and pulling for all he was worth.

A moment later, Ned managed to grab hold of Marie’s other wrist. Between the two of them, they yanked her free of the cold spring water, the mud, and the dark. Ned let go once Marie’s head and shoulders were above ground, and Christian tugged her the rest of the way out of the hole and into his arms. The two of them tumbled back onto the grass together. Marie’s skirts were sodden and thick with mud, and she shook violently as Christian closed his arms around her.

“It’s all right,” Christian panted, stroking his hands over her back, arms, shoulders, and finally her face, both to make certain she was truly all right and to comfort her. “I’ve got you. Nothing is going to hurt you now.”

“Christian.”

His name was the only word she was able to get out before he kissed her. Perhaps he shouldn't have been so ardent with Ned and the woman who was technically still his fiancée looking on, but he couldn't help himself. He kissed Marie with all the passion and relief he could manage, sighing and stroking every part of her that he could as the pure joy of having her alive washed over him. He was so overcome that he rolled her to her back and covered her, continuing to kiss her lips, her cheek, her neck and any part of her he could, even though she was muddy and musty.

“Marie, I love you,” he said between kisses. “I love you, I love you, I love you. I'm never letting you out of my sight again.”

Marie laughed wildly, but didn't manage to form whatever wicked thoughts she had into words before he captured his mouth in another kiss.

It was only after Christian had nearly exhausted himself with relief that he became aware of Ned and Lady Aoife standing together, only a few yards away. The impropriety of their situation hit him then, and he shifted off of Marie, struggling to stand. He offered Marie his hand and helped her to stand as well.

“Are you well, Lady Marie?” Ned asked, a curious look on his face. The man's mouth twitched, almost as if he were trying not to smile.

“I...” Marie ran a hand through her wet, mud-streaked hair, then patted her arms and body, as if trying to determine the answer. “Miraculously, I think I'm well after all that,” she said with a weak laugh.

A moment later, her face pinched with guilt.

“I’m so sorry, Lord Garvagh, Lady Aoife,” she blurted. “Christian and I trapped you in the springhouse deliberately in an effort to get you to admit your feelings for each other. I knew you couldn’t possibly marry Christian,” she told Lady Aoife, her words fast and breathless. It was as if Marie suddenly needed to confess absolutely everything as penance after her brush with death. “I know you love Lord Garvagh, and I love Christian.” She leaned into Christian, grasping his hand. “None of us would have been happy if we’d gone through with what the idiots who arranged our betrothals wanted.”

“But...but how did you know?” Lady Aoife blinked rapidly, blushing harder than Christian had ever seen a woman blush.

“I saw you with Lord Garvagh right here the other day,” Marie confessed. “But I’d noticed the way the two of you look at each other before that.”

“You are observant, Lady Marie,” Ned said, continuing to look as though he might want to smile, but didn’t dare to.

Lady Aoife gasped suddenly, clasping a hand to her chest. “Dear God, you heard me confess to...to...” She squeezed her eyes shut, as if doing so could block out everything they’d heard her say to Ned in the springhouse.

“You’re not the only one,” Christian told Ned, hoping the man would catch which way the wind was blowing so that further explanations weren’t necessary.

“That was the reason my brother was so adamant about engaging me to whatever gentleman he could,” Lady Aoife said. “He knew I’d sinned, and he feared the consequences. He...he demanded I reveal my lover’s name, and when I

refused to incriminate Ned, he arranged a marriage he believed would be suitable. But Ned is the man I love.”

“Lord Kilrea,” Ned said with exaggerated formality, standing straighter. “I would humbly request that you break your engagement to Lady Aoife.” He stepped closer to the woman’s side, slipping an arm around her waist. “I believe Lady Marie is correct in that we would all be happier if we were able to follow our hearts and not our misguided senses of duty.”

“I agree,” Christian said. The spark of a thought kept him from shaking hands on everything yet, though. “I agree on one condition,” he went on.

“Condition?” Marie gaped at him, looking ready to browbeat him if she didn’t like what he said next.

A grin pulled at the corner of Christian’s mouth. “As I understand it, in medieval times, brides were traded for land.” He peeked at Marie. “A wise scholar suggested that the practice could be renewed.”

Ned’s back stiffened, and he narrowed his eyes at Christian. “Are you saying you’ll only release Lady Aoife to marry me if I give over this disputed property to you?”

Christian could see at once that driving that hard of a bargain would hurt him in the long run instead of helping. “No,” he said with a laugh. “I was just teasing. But I do think the two of us should be able to come out to some sort of agreement that will allow for shared rights to the spring and its benefits. Are you willing to compromise for a deal that will benefit all?”

Ned smiled, extending his hand. “I am,” he said. When Christian shook the offered hand, Ned went on with, “You’re a

far better negotiator than your father ever was. I have a feeling we've entered a new era of cooperation between our estates."

His words were meant as a compliment, but they squeezed Christian's heart with almost unimaginable sorrow. "My father," he said, glancing off into the distance. The grief that had held him in its grip threatened to drag him under again, like the flow of the stream had almost dragged Marie to a watery death.

Before those thoughts could truly take hold, though, he spotted one of his footmen racing down the hill toward them. "My lord!" the young man called, his voice as urgent as his running. "My lord, you must come now. Your mother!"

Christian didn't wait to ask what the man meant by his words. He shot into motion. Marie ran with him, in spite of her sodden clothes. Even Ned and Lady Aoife raced up the hillside toward the house with him.

"My lord, she's awake," the footman gasped as Christian and Marie reached him.

"Awake?" Marie panted.

"Yes, my lady." The footman glanced briefly to Marie as they all dashed for the house. He went on with, "And she's asking for you, my lord."

Christian was wet from his thighs down, caked with mud, and smelled of sweat and stagnant water, but he didn't care. He tore through the house—Marie keeping close to his side, even though she was more of a sloppy, dripping mess than he was—and up the stairs to his mother's bedchamber.

A cry of joy nearly ripped from his lungs as he burst into her doorway, only to find his mother sitting up in bed. The sling encasing her broken left arm was more visible with her

sitting up. Dozens of pillows were propped behind her, and she still looked as weak as a baby bird as a nurse fed her broth, but she was clearly awake.

“Christian,” she choked out, raising her shaky hands to him.

The nurse pulled away as Christian charged to his mother’s side.

“Mama,” he groaned, practically throwing himself into her arms, as though he were still a lad of five. She was and always would be his mother, and he needed her right then more than he’d ever needed anyone. “Oh, Mama, you’re back.” He wept against her shoulder, not caring who saw him so unmanned.

“There, there, dear,” she said in a wisp of a voice. “You’re all right, my darling.”

Christian poured his heart out in weeping for a few more seconds before the fullness of the situation hit him. He jerked straight, grasping his mother’s thin, cool hands, and looked guiltily into her eyes. “Mama, did they tell you what happened?” he asked, his voice cracking.

His mother nodded, her face pinching and tears forming in her eyes. The way her soft lips quivered and grief filled her face was too much for Christian to bear. But he had to bear it. Responsibility wasn’t only about solving property disputes and marrying the right woman, it was about being the rock that the people he loved needed in their darkest moments. Marie had taught him that.

“I’m so sorry, Mama,” he said, trying to be strong. Tears streamed across his cheeks all the same. “It was my fault. The accident was all my fault. I...I killed them.”

His mother's eyes widened, and her mouth quivered for a moment before she could ask, "What do you mean?"

Christian shook his head, sniffing wetly and wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. "I was angry at Father for engaging me to Lady Aoife without my consent. Marie is the woman I love, and I was determined to do whatever it took to get out of one marriage so that I could marry her."

"That did not kill your father, a carriage wreck did," his mother said. With a supreme effort of will, she raised her good hand to pat his head.

"But the wreck was my fault." Christian forced himself to go on. "I thought that if Father was unable to reach the engagement party, it would buy me more time to get out of the betrothal. So I...I loosened the bolts on the axle of Father's favorite carriage so that it would break down on the way to Dunegard Castle." He lowered his head in absolute shame.

"Oh, my dear, sweet, foolish boy. We discovered the problem with the bolts before we got into your father's preferred carriage," his mother said. Christian snapped his head up at her revelation. "Morris knew something was wrong with that one and had already determined we should use the other carriage. And so we did."

"You were riding in another carriage that day?" The idea had never crossed Christian's mind. Nor had he thought to visit the carriage house to see whether the carriage he'd tampered with was still there. He felt like the biggest fool imaginable. But he also felt free.

"It was a hare," his mother said, shaking her head and squeezing her eyes shut. "I saw it dart across the road and was in the middle of noting its speed to your father when the

horses reared. Seconds later, it happened. I don't remember anything after that."

"Spooked horses could cause that kind of an accident," Marie said in a gentle voice, stepping closer to Christian. She had hope in her eyes, as though something she had known all along had finally been proven true. Christian loved her more than ever for it.

"Good heavens, Lady Marie?" his mother said, sagging back against her pillows. She was losing strength. Christian wanted to leave her to sleep and recover, but his mother's gaze was fixed on Marie. "Oh, my dear, I have done you such a great disservice."

"You've done nothing of the sort, Lady Kilrea," Marie said, coming forward, but stopping short of sitting on the bed or reaching out in her current state.

His mother shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut. "I should have stood up to my husband when he suggested you marry Miles and dear Lady Aoife marry Christian. I could see as clear as day from the moment I first saw the two of you together that you were meant for each other and no one else."

"You could?" Christian blinked, his heart feeling lighter and lighter with each new revelation.

"A blind beggar could see that the two of you are best suited for each other," his mother went on, her voice growing softer as her strength waned. "Who else would be able to keep the two of you rascallions in line but each other?"

Marie laughed, then clapped her hands to her face. Her eyes grew glassy with tears.

"I should have forced your father to renege on the marriage arrangements," his mother said.

“There’s no need to worry, Mama.” Christian stood, leaning close to kiss his mother’s forehead. “Everything has worked out well in the end. I’m no longer engaged to Lady Aoife.” And Marie clearly wasn’t betrothed to Miles any longer. “You need to rest and build up your strength.”

“Yes, yes I must be strong for the wedding,” his mother said, her eyes closed.

“Mama, I just said there would be no wedding. Lady Aoife and I have agreed to end our engagement.”

“Not that one,” his mother said, managing to sound humorously scolding in spite of her exhaustion. “You and Lady Marie.”

Christian smiled with his whole heart. He glanced over his shoulder at Marie, and his smile grew. “You’re right, Mama,” he said. “You need to regain your strength for the wedding.”

A few more soft words were exchanged as Christian supervised the nurse tucking his mother in for a nap. He gave the order for the doctor to be called, only to find out a footman had already been sent to fetch him. There was nothing to do after that but to retreat downstairs.

“Do you need any other assistance here?” Ned asked, thumping Christian’s shoulder in a brotherly manner.

“No,” Christian breathed. He reached for Marie’s hand, drawing him closer to his side. “I think we’ll be all right.”

Ned nodded, then exchanged a smile with Lady Aoife.

“Please do call on us if there is anything we can do,” Lady Aoife said.

“We will,” Marie answered for both herself and Christian.

A few more pleasantries were exchanged before Ned and Lady Aoife left. Once they were gone, Christian walked into the afternoon parlor with Marie. He wanted to flop into one of the chairs and let go of every ounce of tension he'd been holding for weeks. No, he wanted to go up to his bedroom and take Marie with him. Even if he didn't have the energy to make love to her, he would have been content just to hold her and sleep. Provided they were both naked, of course.

"I should go home, seeing as I'm such a mess," Marie said, attempting to pull her hand out of his.

He wouldn't let her go. Not only that, he tugged her closer, closing his arms around her and resting his forehead against hers.

"I love you and I want you, whether you're a mess or perfectly presentable," he said, then kissed her lips lightly. "I want you, whether you're wicked and scandalous or whether you're a saint. I want you in my life, in my arms, in my heart, and in my bed, from now until the end of time and beyond."

"You're in luck," she said, looping her arms over his shoulders and smiling. The heat in her eyes was enough to warm him for good. "Because I want you even more than you want me."

"Doubtful," he said, his heart swelling with affection and with peace.

"I could argue the point with you," Marie said, stealing a kiss. "And I probably will at some point."

"You won't win an argument about who loves who more," he said, laughing.

"Are you certain of that?" She arched one eyebrow.

“I’m certain that we’ll have the rest of our lives to figure it out,” he answered, then tightened his arms around her and kissed her until they were both breathless.

Thirteen



One Year Later

Labor was easily the most miserable experience of Marie's life.

"I can't go on," she panted, then grunted as the urge to push overwhelmed her yet again.

"It won't be long now, my lady," the midwife said in a voice that was infuriatingly calm. "I can already see the head."

Marie wanted to tell the woman to hurry things along, but the best she could manage was a soul-shattering growl of pain as she pushed for all she was worth.

"Isn't there anything you can do to make the process easier?" Christian asked from the corner of the room, where he had been allowed to pace during Marie's delivery.

Everyone from the doctor—who had gotten himself thrown out of the room an hour before for irritating Marie—to the attending nurse had insisted men had no place at a birth, but Marie had absolutely refused to be parted from her husband.

“Babies come in their own time and in their own way, my lord,” the midwife said in her soothing voice without looking at him.

Marie was too busy having her body split open to pay much mind to the exchange, but she did manage to shout, “Christian, come here this instant!”

Christian launched toward the bed, startling the nurse who stood ready with a receiving blanket beside a basin of water. “Yes, my darling?” he asked when he reached her side.

He made the mistake of swaying close enough to her that Marie was able to grab his arm as her pain reached an alarming crescendo. She squeezed so hard that Christian cried out as well, half crumpling on the bed.

“This is your doing,” Marie ground out, even as most of her effort went into bringing the baby into the world. “You and your naked.”

She wasn’t certain if she’d spoken a coherent thought or not, but Christian seemed to accept his part in the whole thing. “I know, I know,” he gasped, “and I’m sorry. But I won’t promise not to do it again.”

Marie cried out—partly in pain, partly because she could feel the moment had come as the midwife cooed soothingly and reached between her legs, and partly because she wanted to laugh at Christian’s off-color comment but couldn’t.

“Here we go, my lady, here we go,” the midwife called out, an excited look in her eyes.

The moment was horrible, wonderful, unbelievable, and indescribable, but within seconds, Marie felt as though she’d been turned inside out, physically and emotionally, as a tiny cry rent the air.

“Here she is, my lady,” the midwife said in a delighted voice. She nodded for the nurse to come forward with some sort of clamp and scissors.

All of the pain, all of the stress and misery were forgotten entirely the moment the midwife lifted the mottled, bloody, and squalling baby girl to show Marie.

“It’s a baby,” Christian gasped, astonishment and bliss lighting his expression. “You actually had a baby.”

“We did,” Marie corrected him. She reached for the tiny girl as the midwife handed her over, then began the afterbirth clean-up. Marie wanted to laugh and cry and gasp in wonder as she held her daughter for the first time.

“You did all the work,” Christian said, laughing and weeping with her as he sank onto the bed, sliding his arm around Marie to support her.

She needed the support as well. Labor had only lasted seven hours, but she was more exhausted than she’d ever been in her life. She was also more in love than she’d ever been, with both her daughter and Christian. She leaned her head against his chest, closing her eyes for a moment and counting her blessings over how lucky she was.

“She appears to be fine and healthy,” the midwife said as she and the nurse took care of the aftermath. A wry grin lit the woman’s face. “Perhaps a little too healthy, if you’ll forgive my impertinence. No one is going to believe that darling girl is three months early.”

Marie knew she should be embarrassed by giving birth six months after her wedding to Christian. In truth, it could have been worse. They’d caused enough of a scandal by marrying only six months after the deaths of Christian’s father and

brother. Even by modern standards, it hadn't been enough time for proper mourning. But everyone in County Antrim was already whispering about the need for such scandalous haste. Those whispers had grown in volume when Marie began to show within two months of the wedding. It was exactly the sort of thing society expected from one of those wicked O'Shea sisters.

Neither Marie nor Christian cared one whit, though.

"I can't stop staring at her," Christian said, his voice tight with emotion. He nestled closer to Marie, reaching around to stroke their daughter's head. "And to think that something so alive and miraculous could come hard on the heels of such tragedy."

"The natural successor to death is life," Marie reasoned. "Just as the natural progression after sorrow is joy."

"Joy," Christian repeated, resting his cheek against the top of Marie's head. "What do you think of that for a name?"

Marie's heart flipped excitedly. "I think that would be perfect," she said. She beamed down at their daughter. "Welcome to the world, Joy."

"May you bring as much happiness and excitement to this world as your dear mama has brought to me," Christian added, brushing his thumb over little Joy's brow, then kissing Marie's cheek. "Though you're as likely as not to bring chaos, mischief, and trouble to the world as anything else. Just like your mama."

Marie laughed. "Just like your papa, you mean," she corrected him.

"Just like the both of us," Christian said, settling the matter.

Marie glanced up at him, meeting his grin with one of her own. She couldn't imagine her life being any more perfect than it was with Christian and their family.



I HOPE YOU ENJOYED MARIE AND CHRISTIAN'S STORY! THEY were such fun characters to write. And so are the rest of the O'Shea sisters! Like Colleen. Gosh, she really hates Lord Boleran. She finds him boorish, arrogant, and overbearing. Or does she just think those things to hide an entirely different set of feelings she has for him? What happens when a mystery causes her to go snooping on his property in the middle of the night? And will Colleen be able to survive the scandal of being caught? Find out in *If You Wannabe My Marquess*.

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About Merry Farmer

USA Today Bestselling author Merry Farmer lives in suburban Philadelphia with her two cats, Justine and Peter. She has been writing since she was ten years old and realized she didn't have to wait for the teacher to assign a creative writing project to write something. It was the best day of her life. Her books have reached the top of Amazon's charts, and have been named finalists for several prestigious awards, including the RONE Award for indie romance.

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Passion's Lasting Promise



A REGENCY CASTLE ROMANCE

AMANDA MARIEL

Foreword

Amidst the haunting ruins of Almerry Castle, Captain Camden Beauchamp, scarred by the trials of Waterloo, finds his world intertwined with that of Rebecca Summerville—a woman with an indomitable spirit and a haunted past. As their souls collide within the ancient walls, they must confront their shared history and discover whether love’s enduring legacy can heal the wounds of war.

One



Northumberland, Summer, 1815

Lady Rebecca Sumerville could scarcely believe her eyes. Her gaze was fixated on the faint flicker of light coming from Almerry Castle, like a beckoning siren, dancing within the slender lancet windows of the second-story entry hall. She couldn't contain her astonishment and whispered to her twin sister in hushed urgency, "Phoebe, do you see that?"

"See what? And why are you whispering?" Her sister slanted a curious stare at her.

Why indeed? Rebecca hesitated. Perhaps it was the fear that any abrupt sound might scare the mysterious light away that compelled her to whisper. With a reluctant glance away from the castle, she turned her gaze to her sister and said, "Over there," pointing at Almerry with trembling fingers, "the light." Her heart sank as she looked back at the castle, now barely visible against the night sky, only to find the mesmerizing glow had inexplicably vanished.

"I see nothing." Phoebe shook her head, chestnut curls flouncing about her neck and face.

“It was there. I saw it. A flickering glow coming from the lancet windows.” Rebecca turned, her green eyes fixed on Almerry Castle, yearning to witness the elusive flickering glow once more. She frowned, a sudden unease gripped her, and she pressed a trembling hand to her abdomen.

Her family’s Northumberland estate bordered the ancient stone castle on the opposite side of a small creek. In the light of day, the castle’s imposing silhouette was clearly visible from their home. Throughout her life, Rebecca had spent countless hours gazing at the formidable keep, letting her imagination roam free, weaving stories within its ancient walls.

The great keep peeked out from behind high walls, encasing the sandstone structure. She’d snuck over to the castle on more than one occasion, though she’d never entered its walls. Most frequently, she strolled around the outer wall, studying the stone. On some occasions, she’d sat near the postern gate. Each time she laid eyes on Almerry, she created tales in her mind about the castle and its legendary occupants.

According to local lore, no one had lived there for hundreds of years. Not since Sir Ariston Beauchamp and his beloved Lady Isabel Staunton passed away. Rebecca imagined what the couple must have lived like and spun her own stories about their life and love.

Phoebe laced an arm through hers. “Let us return to the party.”

Rebecca smiled at her sister. “Not just yet. I want to watch for the light to return. What do you suppose caused it?”

“I don’t know. Mayhap it was your imagination.” Phoebe tugged on Rebecca’s arm. “Come on, before Mother sends a search party to look for us.”

Rebecca's chest tightened as she stared back at the castle. Had she imagined the flickering glow? She didn't think so.

Phoebe tugged again, pulling Rebecca forward. "Please be sensible. Even if you saw a light, it was likely just the moon's glow. There is nothing to be gained by remaining here. Let us return now."

She supposed her sister was right. By now, mother had surely noted their absence. Should they dally much longer, they'd earn her scorn. After all, tonight was about them. Mother had gone to great efforts to arrange the house party. She'd invited the most sought-after families along with their bachelor sons, hoping to make a match for at least one of her eligible daughters. She'd have their hides if she took notice of their absence.

"If we must." Sighing, Rebecca followed Phoebe toward the house. "Though I do find this party rather tedious."

Phoebe squeezed her elbow. "Come now, it is not all that bad."

"Perhaps not for you." Rebecca grinned. "Which gentleman has your fancy?"

"Do not tease me." Phoebe swatted Rebecca with her fan.

The quartet's music drifted from the house as they drew closer. Light spilled out onto the lawn, casting the front gardens in a glow. Rebecca reached for Phoebe's dance card. "Shall we see who awaits you, dear?" She flicked her mischievous hazel gaze over it. "Lord Owens claimed two dances. Might I find you as Lady Owens before the summer quits us?"

Phoebe jerked her wrist away. "Stop jesting. I do not find you at all amusing."

With their arms hooked together, they reentered the ballroom. Noting the light flush upon her sister's cheeks, Rebecca stifled a laugh. "Very well, if you insist."

Phoebe released Rebecca's arm. "Here he comes now."

Lord Owens strolled toward them, his eyes sparkling. He did not wear his soldier's uniform as he had on previous occasions, but a pang of upset raced through Rebecca all the same. How could Phoebe have designs on such a man after what had happened to their brother? "Does it not bother you that he is a soldier, Phoebe?"

"No, and do hush. He might hear you and take offense."

Rebecca looked around the crowded room. "I'm certain he cannot."

"No matter. I find Lord Owens and all the other soldiers to be quite honorable. They are heroes. We should be happy to dance with any one of them."

"A dance could lead to more and more could lead to heartache. I shall not, will not, do that to myself."

"Do not be so harsh," Phoebe said.

It wasn't that Rebecca disliked soldiers. She simply could not abide putting herself through more unnecessary heartache. Her brother, like all soldier's had been brave if not foolish and his death still caused her pain—it always would.

"There is nothing heroic about death and chaos." Rebecca glanced at her twin, noting the sparkle dancing in her eyes.

For an instant, a pang of envy struck her. Despite being twins, Rebecca had always thought Phoebe was much prettier. She took after their mother, nearly a head shorter, with the kind of build that made gentlemen naturally protective. Her

hazel eyes suited her thick chestnut locks. Rebecca, on the other hand, resembled their father, too tall to be fashionable, with straight blonde hair she could never get to hold a curl.

“Nonsense.” Phoebe stepped away to join Lord Owens before Rebecca could say more. Not that her stubborn sister would listen, anyway. What a ninny to so happily offer herself up to heartbreak and abandonment!

Well, not Rebecca. She’d had all she was willing to take of war and soldiers. She’d not be made a widow at the end of some enemy’s weapon. Life would not find her as it had her sister-in-law, Daphne. The poor lady was barely wed to Rebecca’s brother long enough to be with child when Roland was called away to fight. Now she found herself a widow raising a wee one without a father, all because her husband had chosen to purchase a commission in the British Army.

Pushing the dreadful memory aside, she fanned herself while she moved through the crush of people toward the refreshment table. Between the guests crowded into the room and the warm summer temperatures, the ball had become quite stifling. Humidity caused sweat to form at the back of Rebecca’s neck where her hair was gathered in a chignon.

Someone rested a hand on her shoulder, stopping her halfway to the refreshment table.

“Rebecca darling, I’d like to introduce you to Lord Fredrickson.”

Drat. So much for avoiding mother’s matchmaking. Rebecca ground her teeth before turning to face mother with a fake grin pasted onto her lips. Mother smiled back with mischief dancing in her hazel gaze.

Rebecca nodded stiffly at the tall man beside Mother. He was well built, with broad shoulders and a sturdy frame. She had to admit he was rather dashing. His black hair, with a hint of grey at the temples, shone in the candlelight while his brown eyes reflected warmth.

Nonetheless, he was not for her.

“Lord Fredrickson served with Roland in the second regiment and has just returned from Waterloo.” Mother glanced up at the gentleman, admiration shining in her gaze.

“How fortunate.” Rebecca let the smile fall from her lips. “Did you know my brother well? Roland was not so lucky as you, my lord. He is never to return to us.”

Mother inhaled sharply. “Rebecca.”

Lord Fredrickson’s mouth pulled into a wince at Rebecca’s words. “I am terribly sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, my lord.” She turned to her mother. “I fear I have come down with a headache. Might I retire to my rooms?”

Mother touched a gloved hand to Rebecca’s brow. “Very well, darling. I’ll send a maid up with something to soothe the ache.”

“Thank you, Mother.” Rebecca offered Lord Fredrickson a curt nod, then took her leave. Her head did not truly throb, but she’d found herself desperate to escape the crush. She simply said the first thing that came to mind.

Thank heavens it worked.

Phoebe stepped in front of her just as she reached the door leading from the crowded ballroom. “Where are you off to now?”

“I have a headache.” Rebecca forced herself to ignore the inclination to avert her gaze.

Phoebe narrowed her eyes. “No, you don’t. Tell me you are not planning to sneak off to Almerry.”

“Of course not. I simply cannot tolerate one more moment of this ball. I’m going to bed.”

“You can’t fool me. I know you’re considering a trek to the castle. At least wait for the morrow.”

Phoebe knew Rebecca well. It would do her no good to argue over her intentions, as her sister would see right through whatever Rebecca said. “I considered it, but have changed my mind.”

“What a relief.” Phoebe grinned. “Might you reconsider your stance on mother’s party as well? If you would allow yourself to have some fun, you might find it tolerable, after all. There are many gentlemen here who did not fight in the war.”

Rebecca shook her head. “I am well aware of who is in attendance. Please let me pass.”

Phoebe moved aside, calling after Rebecca as she mounted the staircase. “It will be a long week if you insist on avoiding the festivities.”

Rebecca only quickened her pace. Long week indeed. This was but the second day of her mother’s house party. The festivities were planned to last a fortnight. The family knew Mother intended to find husbands for Rebecca and Phoebe, but the guests were under the impression the party was to celebrate the end of the war. Rebecca supposed that’s why Mother invited so many soldiers to join. Just about everyone of importance who had served was present, along with many titled families with their bachelor sons in tow.

None of the gentlemen interested her, least of all the war heroes. Sure, there were many handsome, desirable gentlemen in attendance, but looks and titles held no sway with her. When she married, if she married, it would be for love, not some match arranged by her mother, or anyone else. Her heart would do the choosing.

After lighting a lantern, she settled onto the window seat in her room. She loved sitting on the plush velvet surface while she read or stared at the castle. Rebecca set her lantern down and peered out the window, searching through the dark veil of night for the shadowed outline of Almerry.

Ah, there it was, a barely visible monument in the moonlight. Legend had it Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel shared a love so great that not even death could separate them. It was said they remained at Almerry together to this day, and when the night was still, you could hear them calling to each other across the castle lands. She wanted a love like theirs. A love so strong not even the finality of death could break its bonds.

“My lady.”

Rebecca glanced toward the door. Her maid stood at the entrance with a tray in her hands.

“Your mother sent up a tonic.” The maid crossed the room and placed the tray near Rebecca.

“Thank you.” She managed a weak smile. “I do not wish to be disturbed tonight. You may pick up the tray in the morning.”

“Yes, my lady.” The maid curtsied, then departed.

Rebecca turned back to the window and leaned her forehead against the glass. Despite the warmth of the summer night, the leaded glass felt cool against her skin. She sighed,

staring back at the keep. What caused the flickers of light she'd seen earlier? Had someone been inside the ruins? Or had she imagined it as Phoebe suggested?

Her pulse increased as the light caught her eye again—bigger, brighter—a flickering beacon against the blackness of night. This time the glow appeared to be coming from higher in the keep. A smile stretched across her face. She'd not imagined a thing. Someone, or something, was in the castle.

She narrowed her gaze, hoping to see more clearly. The light glowed behind the lancet windows of the massive stone structure. It looked as if someone had built a fire in one of the rooms. Who would dare to enter the castle? She could not imagine, but someone had to be in there. Every fiber of her being called for her to go catch the intruder.

She stood, strolling halfway across her room before stilling. No. She couldn't. She'd given Phoebe her word, and she'd not go back on it.

Leastwise, not tonight.

Two



Camden Beauchamp strolled across the large bailey, stretching his stiff muscles. He peered through the thick blanket of fog clinging to the castle grounds, then massaged his stiff neck as he headed for the stable.

The medieval stone floor he'd slept on left him sore all over. He'd arrived at Almerry late last evening, sadly ill-prepared for what he found. What the devil had he been thinking, arriving at an abandoned castle alone, and at night?

Once Wellington released him from duty, he dismissed those in his charge and set out for a quiet place to clear his head. Though he loved his family, he found himself reluctant to return home straightaway. Not that he regretted his part in the war or his duties as a soldier. He took pride in his accomplishments.

All the same, the war had left him weary and in much need of solitude. He longed for time to himself to make peace with all he had seen and done. The war was still close in his heart—there was no denying it—but something about this castle filled him with hope that perhaps, just perhaps, he could find peace once more.

He glanced around the bailey, focusing through the eerie fog. Leastwise, no one was likely to bother him here. The

castle lay in ruins from years of neglect. Its inner wall had been reduced in size by plundering villagers a hundred or so years before. The once grand gatehouse appeared more like a shell, its enormous gates rotted away long ago. Most of the outbuildings had been taken apart, their stones either carried away or scattered across the bailey.

He trailed his gaze across the grounds from the stable to the keep. They still held their shape but also suffered damage from the years of neglect. Most of the wood within the stable had rotted away, though the stone walls held strong. The keep was mostly intact, other than the partially caved in roof making the fifth floor uninhabitable.

Camden had inherited the castle from his uncle upon his death. It had been passed down through his family for centuries, though no one ever bothered to make use of it. According to his father, no one had lived here since the thirteenth century. Almerry had long ago been stripped of most of its furnishings, only a few moth eaten tapestries and broken pieces of furniture lingered.

A chill tickled his spine as he glanced from the gatehouse to the postern gate, paying mind to all things in-between. Considering the once grand castle's current condition, it was no wonder people believed the spirits of his ancestors haunted the place.

Almerry had been abandoned after the deaths of his ancestors, Sir Ariston Beauchamp and Lady Isabel Staunton-Beauchamp, not even a hundred years after it had been built. So far as Camden knew, he was the first to slumber here since. Family legend held that no one could stand the idea of disturbing their spirits and so they allowed the castle to fall into ill-repair.

Camden turned toward the stables, then stepped into the dark interior. He stopped behind a large stall. Closing his eyes, he inhaled deeply, savoring the dust-filled air mingled with spices of hay and leather. Mayhap he should consider having the old pile of stones restored and making it his permanent home. A quiet life in the country did hold some appeal. At the least, he would be able to avoid the pressures of London.

He made his way to a stall at the end of the row, where his stallion whinnied. The horse nudged Camden's arm with his strong head. "Hey there." Camden reached up to stroke the beast's muscled neck. "How about I move these stones so we can get you out and go find some oats?" The horse stepped back, nodding its head and neighing with approval.

Camden would need to gather some wood to repair the rotted stall door along with hay, oats, straw, and commodities for himself. At least a few laborers to help make the repairs would be needed as well, and perhaps a house servant or two.

A sharp intake of air drew his attention to the door. He glanced away from his task, searching for its source. His heart skipped a beat. A woman stood framed in the morning fog, pale skirts billowing in the breeze.

He did not believe in ghosts, but the woman before him fit the description he'd been given of Lady Isabel Staunton. She was tall and lean with piercing green eyes. The sun's rays cut through the fog, casting her in an eerie glow.

There was no way. It couldn't be. He blinked, then blinked again, but she did not disappear.

Once he recovered from the shock, he noticed her modern clothing and honey-colored hair. The lady wore a flowing mint day gown with a high waistline and short sleeves. A bonnet framed her heart-shaped face, its ribbons tied beneath her chin.

She most certainly wasn't a spirit. Though she had the beauty of an angel.

He opened his mouth to speak.

She marched toward him, wagging one gloved finger. "You have no right to be here, intruder. This is private property. I insist you gather your mount and depart at once."

Her fearless approach held him captive. He studied her tall frame and blazing eyes, her words barely registered through his fascination. What had she called him? An...intruder?

She came to a halt before him, placing her hands on her hips, then peered at him through the loveliest green eyes he'd ever beheld. "What have you to say for yourself?"

"Are you the owner of this castle?" He searched the depths of her gaze, both angry and amused by her behavior.

She steeled her back, anger flashing in her eyes.

"Answer me." He rested one hand on the wall, leaning against it. "Do you own Almerry Castle?"

Notching her chin in defiance, she said, "No, I do not." She pointed one finger at him, holding it just inches from his chest. "But neither do you."

He could have set her straight right then. Told her he owned Almerry Castle. Instead, he smirked, the urge to bait the chit too strong to ignore. "In that case it seems you are an intruder."

Her cheeks tinted a becoming shade of pink, yet she did not avert her gaze. "I have far more right to be here than you do."

He dropped his hand from the cool stone wall and took a step closer to the spirited beauty. Her scent wrapped around

him, enticing his senses with vanilla and jasmine. It had been a long time since he'd smelled a woman's flowery scent. A fact his body could not ignore. He fought the sudden urge to pull her into his arms and said, "How so?"

Camden expected her to back away at his intrusion of her personal space, but instead, she held her ground, her stormy eyes never leaving his. "Not that I owe you an explanation, but I reside in the area and saw light coming from the windows last night. I felt it was my duty to check on the castle."

"And your husband allowed you to march over here and confront an unknown intruder?" The words left his mouth before he had time to consider them. It was a pointless question. He did not care whether she was married or not. Courting was the furthest thing from his mind.

"My parents did not know my intentions," she said, her tone cheeky. "Not that my marital state is any of your concern."

A smile spread across his face, though he could not imagine why. He certainly did not want the viper-tongued lady for himself. Still, he rather enjoyed verbally sparring with her.

He angled his head so his lips hovered just in front of her ear. "I could be dangerous."

She flinched but did not step away from him. "I am not afraid of you."

"You should be." He straightened, meeting her gaze once again. Not a hint of fear reflected back at him. The chit was either daft or made of steel.

"I will not allow you to intimidate me," she said, as she crossed her arms over her chest.

He leaned back against the wall, his gaze locked on hers. “I am Captain Camden Beauchamp, descendent of Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel Beauchamp and rightful owner of Almerry Castle.”

The lady’s eyes flashed with anger, her hands fisted at her sides. “Why didn’t you say so the moment I arrived? Why play games when the truth would have been simpler?” Without giving him the opportunity to answer, she pivoted and marched for the stables exit.

He closed the distance between them, then took hold of her elbow. “You were too busy ordering me off my land to have listened.”

The words he spoke were not entirely true. He’d baited her on purpose for his own amusement, but he never expected her to become so upset. Now his deception caused his chest to squeeze as he stared at her striking profile. The woman was truly beautiful.

She did not flinch, nor did she spare him a glance. She stood frozen upon the green summer grass, her back straight and shoulders squared as though she’d been carved in stone-an ornament belonging to the castle. After a long moment, he released her.

Without as much as a sigh, she strolled toward the gatehouse.

He narrowed his eyes as she moved further away, her feminine form washed in the sunlight and fog, hips swaying with each step. She’d been brave to confront him. It was an admirable trait. He should apologize. Give her credit where she had earned it. He’d wager very few people would have taken an interest and sought to protect his property. At the least, he owed her for that.

“I am sorry for not revealing my identity sooner,” he called after her. “I should not have bated you as I did.”

She glanced over her shoulder, eyes squinted. “I do not believe you regret your actions, nor do I believe you are the rightful owner of Almerry.”

He stared at her in disbelief. How dare she call him a liar? The chit was positively vexing. “Your beliefs are of no consequence. I am Captain Camden Beauchamp, and I do own this property. As for my apology, I withdraw it.”

“I would have expected nothing less.” Without sparing another glance, she made her way across the bailey, then through the gatehouse, before disappearing from his view.

Regret coursed through him, for he knew nothing about the lady. Not even her name. The only information she’d given was that her estate sat nearby. There were several country homes close enough for the occupants to have seen his lantern. Any one of them could be hers. He should chase after her and demand to at least have her name.

Ridiculous, he had no need of a name when he did not care to see her again. Camden shook his head. Whoever the lady might be, one thing was certain: she was the most vexing woman he’d ever encountered. If he never crossed paths with her again, he would not miss her. On the contrary, he’d be grateful.

Determined to forget about her, he marched back to the stable and tossed himself into the work at hand. No matter how many stones he moved, or how long he labored, the confrontation with her continued to tumble through his thoughts.

With his saddle secured, he threw himself onto the stallion's back and squeezed his heels against the beast's sides. He had better things to do than think of the viper-tongued chit. Bloody hell, she'd called him a liar and an intruder. He had little doubt she would be back.

He would have to be prepared, and it was well understood among those in the military that one gained an advantage by knowing their adversary. He called her image into mind, blond hair and flashing green eyes on a tall feminine figure wrapped in the intoxicating scents of vanilla and jasmine.

Indeed, he would know his adversary.

Three



Rebecca clutched the delicate fabric of her skirts in her fists, feeling the lace and embroidery dig into her skin. She quickened her pace until she was jogging across the plush landscape, the verdant grass cushioning each step. The sun cast long shadows that danced playfully around her feet. Mother would give her an earful about proper ladylike behavior if she caught sight of her in such a state, but what did it matter? The way Rebecca felt inside, raging and on fire, couldn't be tamed by corsets and curtsies. She needed to burn off her anger somehow, lest it consume her completely.

Not in all of her years had she met a man as devilishly handsome and utterly vexing as Captain Beauchamp. A roguish smile had played across his lips, and his piercing blue eyes seemed to bore into her very soul. He set her blood boiling, riling her with his words and demeanor, all while holding her captive with his bold looks and cocky charm.

Even now, excitement pulsed through her, bringing every nerve to life. Her heart had thundered against her ribs, her skin had tingled and her breath had struggled at his nearness. She had never experienced such fire or passion as this. All of her senses had been heightened as she'd faced off with him, and when he'd whispered in her ear, a part of her wished he would pull her into his arms.

The captain had tousled dark hair, which she longed to run her fingers through. He was dangerous, a military man. He fought in wars. How could she desire him? Her cheeks warmed at the thought and she hastened her steps. Partly to put distance between her and Captain Beauchamp, but also because she needed to hurry home.

She'd avoided notice by rising before anyone else and making her way to Almerry as the sun crested the horizon. By now, the entire house would be awake and her absence was surely noted. Not that it mattered as all, save for Phoebe, would believe she had simply taken a morning walk. She loathed this house party and Mother's match-making efforts. Regardless, she had to return, and as much as it pained her, she would have to engage in the day's activities.

The thought of spending all afternoon in her mother's matchmaking company made her stomach sour. She loved her mother a great deal and would even go as far as saying she respected her mother's desire to see herself and Phoebe well married, but it did not change the fact that Rebecca had no desire to be matched.

Perhaps she'd join her father's hunting party. A novel idea. For once the hounds were released, she could ride in any direction she chose.

With renewed vigor, Rebecca rushed to her bedchamber. After ringing for her maid, she yanked off her bonnet and cloak, letting the garments fall to the carpet. Rebecca reached into the armoire and retrieved her black velvet riding habit. The hunting party would depart soon and she meant to be among them. She peered out her window at the men gathered below. No time to tarry.

The shuffle of feet made her turn toward the door, expecting her maid. She released a sigh at the sight of her sister.

“There you are. Tell me, did you discover the source of your light?” Phoebe said as she sashayed into the room, her silk fan fluttering gracefully in front of her face. She settled onto the mahogany vanity, pinning Rebecca with an intent stare.

Rebecca’s heart raced, for she knew she could not lie to Phoebe, and once everyone discovered Camden’s presence, it would be all they spoke of. The last thing she wanted was constant reminders of the captain, and that he was right across the creek at Almerry. “You didn’t tell anyone, did you?” Rebecca asked, a slight catch in her voice.

“Don’t be a ninny. Your secrets are safe with me.” Phoebe tilted her head, her hazel eyes studying Rebecca. “Now do tell what you discovered.”

Rebecca brushed lint off the bodice of her habit. It would serve her no purpose to lie to her twin. Phoebe would see right through any tale she wove. She’d never been able to hide anything from her sister, no matter how badly she’d wished to.

Rebecca averted her gaze, pretending nonchalance. “I figured out the source of the mysterious glimmers, but there’s nothing special about it.”

“You are withholding important information from me. Should I go tell Mother about your morning adventure?”

“No. You must stay silent about this.” Rebecca held her dress close to her body. “You cannot say a word, Phoebe. Promise.”

“It was only a jest. I told you I will not speak a word of this and I shan’t. But do tell me what happened before I perish with curiosity.” Phoebe lifted her arm to place the back of her hand across her forehead in a dramatic flourish.

“Very well.” She sighed, glancing down at her velvet riding habit as she drew in a breath. “Almerry’s owner is in residence.”

Phoebe’s eyes grew round. “No one has bothered with that pile of stones in centuries. It cannot be fit for inhabitation. Who is he? Why is he there?”

“A despicable reprobate with terrible manners named Captain Camden Beauchamp, and I really could not say.” Rebecca turned her back to Phoebe. “There, I’ve told you all I know. Now be a dear and help me change.” She cast a glance over her shoulder. “I do not know what is keeping my maid, but I must hurry if I’m to join the hunt.”

Phoebe rose, then came to Rebecca, helping her to slip into the gown before working to fasten the row of buttons along her back. “He must have done something remarkable to earn your description of his character,” she said softly. “Why do you harbor such an ill opinion of the man?”

“He amused himself at my expense while he withheld his identity.” She reached for her riding hat and pins, an unwelcome storm of emotions—outrage, desire, curiosity—raging through her. “For the first time in my life, I wish I would have stayed away from Almerry Castle.”

Phoebe looked up through thick lashes, a small grin tugging at her lips. “Is he handsome?”

Rebecca hesitated, looking away as she considered her words. She let out a deep sigh before responding. “He is...

handsome, I suppose. But he is too obnoxious by far. His cocky demeanor and vexing words make him all together unbearable.” She smoothed her hands down her skirt before placing her bonnet on her head, avoiding Phoebe’s gaze. “I hope to never see him again.”

Phoebe laughed, a wide grin spread across her face, and amusement sparkled in her eyes. “I think I would like to meet this Captain Beauchamp. If only to judge him for myself.”

“Believe me, dear sister, you do not.” She strolled to the doorway. “If you’ll excuse me, I intend to join Father’s hunting party.”

“More likely, you intend to disappear while the others hunt.” Phoebe shot Rebecca a bemused glance. “You don’t fool me. You never have.”

A shaky smile tugged at Rebecca’s lips despite her annoyance. “I beg to disagree, for what is hunting other than disappearing into the landscape, which I absolutely intend to do.”

Phoebe laughed. “In that case, enjoy the hunt.”

Rebecca winked at her sister. “I intend to.”

Four



Lingering wisps of fog clung to the ground as Rebecca steered her mount toward the hunting party. As she drew closer, she offered a smile to her father, who sat atop his white stallion, his gaze meeting hers. Fine lines softened the corners of his deep blue eyes as he looked at her.

“I’m glad you joined us, poppet.” He said, adjusting the reins in his leather-gloved hands as his horse shuffled from side to side. “I will start the hunt once Captain Beauchamp arrives.” He turned his attention to the rolling hills leading toward Almerry, and Rebecca followed suit.

When had Father made Captain Beauchamp’s acquaintance? Her stomach lurched, her lips pressing into a tight line as she tried to come up with a plan of escape. She didn’t want to face him again; not after this morning.

Glancing back at the house, she weighed her options. Should she pretend to be ill again? Mother would likely call the doctor if she did. It would be troublesome but better than facing Camden, or worse, everyone discovering that she had already met the captain. Still, a traitorous part of her elated at the idea of seeing him again.

She contemplated running and staying, lingering in a state of uncertainty, wanting both but unable to commit to either

path. Her heart warred on, growing more uneasy with every passing second until...

“Ah, here’s the captain now.” Father lifted his hand, waving the captain over.

It was too late. She was well and truly cornered.

Captain Beauchamp, with his dashing good looks and easy smile, rode toward them. Rebecca’s stomach flipped at the sight of him, her cheeks burning as memories of their morning encounter flooded back. She resolutely kept her gaze on her horse’s neck, hoping he wouldn’t give away their secret.

“Captain Beauchamp,” Father began in a booming voice, “I’m pleased you could join our hunt. Allow me to introduce my daughter, Lady Rebecca.” He gestured toward her and she forced a smile onto her face before meeting Camden’s gaze.

His features softened into an appreciative smile, and he tipped his head politely in her direction. “A pleasure, my lord,” he said to Father before turning his attention back to Rebecca. “On both counts,” he added, a roguish gleam in his blue eyes.

Rebecca felt an unwelcome thrill race through her at his words and smiled despite herself. This was dangerous. One misstep could cost her dearly, but for now she was safe—or so it seemed from the way Father was looking between the two of them approvingly.

Still, she knew better than to get too comfortable around Captain Camden Beauchamp—no matter how attractive or charming he may be, there was no denying that his presence was trouble waiting to happen.

If father were to find out she had so brazenly approached Camden, he’d assign a proper and permanent chaperone to her.

And mother... A shudder ran down Rebecca's spine. Mother would try to match them.

She guided her horse to follow the hunting party, biding her time. When the opportunity presented, she would make her escape. Camden would follow the hounds along with the rest of the hunters, and she would find a quiet place to spend the afternoon.

She snuck a peek at him. Her heart skipped a beat as the devil flashed her a knowing smile, then winked at her before returning his attention to the dogs. A feverish blush rushed over her cheeks, and she bit down on her lip to stifle the sensations running through her.

"Release the hounds." Her father's booming voice filled the air, startling her out of her thoughts.

She spurred her mount forward, following the pack of hounds toward the river. She'd have to wait until everyone was well distracted to separate from them. It would not do to be noticed.

The hounds cut east across the property, the hunting party riding behind them. She slowed her mount to put more distance between herself and the others. Once she was certain everyone's attention was firmly on the hunt, she directed her horse away from the pack and toward Almerry. The castle was her favorite place to pass time, and since Camden had joined the hunt, she had no reason to fear being caught there.

The castle walls jugged up from the lush green grass, inviting her closer. Rebecca rode across the shallow creek, water splashing up in her wake, and a sense of freedom surged through her. As she galloped up the slope toward the postern wall, she patted the book hidden in the folds of her skirt. She could think of no better way to spend a summer afternoon.

Rebecca tethered her horse to a nearby tree and retrieved her book. A cool breeze tossed the curls around the back of her neck as she strode closer to the postern gate. She took in the sight before her, marvelling at the history and grandeur of Almerry Castle. Her mind wandered as she thought about its past. Who had been there before? How had it become so battle-scarred?

The castle walls were made of limestone and granite, and Rebecca could see where arrows had once struck. It was an impressive sight, one that stirred up excitement and wonderment deep within her.

She lifted one hand, trailing her fingers across the rough, cool bricks. They held secrets, of that she was certain. The whole castle had a story to tell. Oh, she knew a little, but she longed to hear the entire tale. Her eyelids fluttered shut. Someday.

“My lady.”

Rebecca’s heart skipped a beat and her throat went dry as Camden’s voice filled the air. She had hoped he wouldn’t follow her here, but it seemed he had keenly observed her separation from the hunting party.

Her fingers froze, still trailing along the rough limestone and granite of the castle walls. She could feel his presence behind her, and she shivered despite the warmth of the summer sun. He was closer now, too close for comfort.

“My lady,” he said again, this time with more authority in his voice.

Rebecca slowly turned to face the vexing man. His gaze upon her made her heart flutter, and she found herself at a loss for words.

“The hounds went east,” Camden said, gesturing off into the distance with one hand. “Whatever are you doing here?”

He stepped closer as he spoke and Rebecca unconsciously took a step back, almost tripping over a rock in her haste to maintain some distance between them. Her cheeks burned at being caught here—on his land—by him. What must she look like from his perspective? No doubt he thought her a flighty young girl who had strayed from the safety of the party in pursuit of something foolish.

Seeing no other choice, Rebecca decided to brazen it out. After all, she was the daughter of a powerful earl. With an air of defiance, she met Camden’s gaze. His blue eyes danced mischievously and in that moment, she’d have given anything to smack the smirk off his too-handsome face. “I lost the trail.”

“And you happened to have a book with you by coincidence.” He nodded at her hand where she clutched the leather bound volume she’d intended to spend the afternoon getting lost in.

Drat. She’d forgotten all about the book the moment she’d heard his voice. Her pulse quickened. “Never mind me. What are you doing here? You were on the hunt as well.”

“I forgot all about the hunt the moment I saw you.” He drew closer to her.

Heat flared across her chest, up her face. “Me?”

“Indeed. I find myself quite captivated by you, lady Rebecca. I had hoped I might meet you again. It is the very reason I accepted Lord Chesterfield’s invitation. Though I was not aware that you were his daughter, nor did I expect to find you along for the hunt.”

Invitation? Lord Chesterfield? Drat! Father had invited him to the house party. She edged away, her back bumping into the postern gate. “And now?”

“Now I intend to make amends. Let us forget this morning and begin anew.” He captured her hand in his, sending a fresh wave of heat spiraling through her.

“Why?” she asked, breathless. As she awaited his answer, she felt like a snared rabbit desperate to escape. The thumping of her pulse echoed in her ears as she awaited his reply, tension building with each passing heartbeat as she fought to maintain a calm exterior. She had no wish for him to know how much he was affecting her.

“I intend to stay at Almerry, leastwise, for the foreseeable future. I am also attending your family’s house party. Would it not be best for us to become friendly?”

Rebecca didn’t allow Camden’s words to sway her. She knew that a man such as him would be a dangerous distraction she had no desire to cultivate.

He shifted his weight from one leg to the other, his gaze searching her face for any sign of relenting. But Rebecca was resolute, despite the tugging sensation in her chest each time their eyes met.

“I suppose it would make things more pleasant,” she finally conceded, though she was careful not to reveal how much he affected her with just one glance. “That is, if I planned on spending time in your company. I assure you, I do not.”

Camden chuckled softly and stepped closer to her until they were only inches apart. His blue eyes held hers captive as his gaze roamed over her face before coming back up to meet

hers once more. She held her breath as he slowly leaned toward her until she could feel the warmth of his breath against her cheek and smell the faint hint of mint on his lips...
“And if we cross paths again?”

Rebecca felt her heart racing as Camden’s lips hovered dangerously close to hers. She could feel the heat emanating from his body, the scent of his cologne filling her senses. Her eyes fluttered shut as she awaited his next move, a part of her daring him to close the gap between them.

“If we cross paths again,” Camden whispered, his breath hot against her skin. “I expect you to share a book with me.”

Rebecca’s eyes flew open, surprised at the unexpected turn of events. Her mind raced as she fought to regain her composure. “I suppose that could be arranged,” she replied coolly, taking a step back to put some space between them.

Camden merely grinned at her response, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “I look forward to it, my lady.”

With a slight bow, he turned and strode off, leaving Rebecca alone with her racing thoughts. As she watched his retreating figure, she couldn’t help but feel a sense of excitement and anticipation. It was rather like being drawn to a flame. She knew touching it would burn, but could not stop herself from drawing close.

Five



Camden stood back and surveyed his handiwork. He had just finished nailing the last nail into the stall door, and now the heavy door was securely in place. A layer of grime and dust covered his face and hands, and his clothes were now stained with dirt and sweat. He tried to brush away the streaks of dust on his shirt, but only smeared the dirt further with his efforts.

As he wiped his brow with a soiled sleeve, Camden couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction. He had done this alone and the stall door was now secure. He stepped away from the stall and looked down the length of the stable, feeling a deep sense of contentment.

A hearty neigh drifted from a nearby stall, and he turned to see his horse as it whinnied and tossed its brown head.

“You don't care for the noise. Do you, boy?” He grinned and rubbed his aching back. “A few more nails and then you will have peace.”

The day had been hectic. He'd made up a makeshift bed in one of the third-floor chambers, and the old solar now contained a wingback chair along with a table. Woodworking had always been a hobby of his. The work allowed him to

focus his energy on something other than Rebecca and his memories of the war.

He'd supervised cleaning and repairs around the castle and seen the kitchen stocked with food. Lord Chesterfield had been most generous insisting Camden use one of his footmen rather than going into Manchester himself to hire laborers and purchase supplies. The gesture saved him copious amounts of time. Now he had two servants and the necessary commodities to keep the castle running.

He glanced at the stable's exit. Rebecca's heart-shaped face, lush rosy lips, and fiery green eyes intruded on his thoughts. He snatched up another nail and pounded it into the wood as if to chase the memory away. The hammer slipped, landing a blow to his thumb.

"Bloody hell." Camden grimaced as he shook his throbbing hand. He had been so lost in thought that he had not paid attention to the hammer's aim. His thumb was now covered in a small trickle of blood, and he hastily wrapped a handkerchief around it.

Not even the pain in his thumb dulled the memory of her.

No lady had ever turned her back on him before, but Rebecca had done so twice in the same day. By all accounts, he was a handsome and successful captain in the British Army. Women threw themselves at him everywhere he went. But not Rebecca.

He returned the hammer and nails to the tack room, then massaged the back of his neck as the time he'd spent with Rebecca replayed through his mind. She'd treated him like a fly buzzing about her golden curls and shooed him away just as fast.

Another neigh made him turn his head back toward the entrance. Rebecca had stood in that very spot, capturing his curiosity from the first moment he laid eyes on her. She'd been bold and vexing, but also fearless and beautiful. Then later, at the castle wall, he'd seen her passion and fire as they faced off again. The warmth of desire spread through him at the memories. How he had longed to kiss her. Heaven help him, he longed to do more than kiss. He wished to know more about her—to know all of her.

He'd had no intention of attending the house party beyond the hunt, despite what he'd said to Rebecca. Lord Chesterfield had extended the invitation, but Camden had not committed to attending. He had only joined the hunt, hoping to discover who she was. House parties and such were the very things he aimed to avoid by lingering at Almerry rather than returning home.

But Rebecca had changed his mind with a few coy words. She'd presented a challenge he could not refuse. His stomach soured. He could not sway her opinion of him if he did not spend time with her.

Ack! He would go mad if he kept thinking about her. He glared at his still throbbing thumb. If the chit weren't so distracting...

But she was distracting—and beautiful and witty and brave. To the devil with it. He had to see her again, and because he had to see her again, he would attend the house party. But first he needed to bathe and dress.

He entered the keep, then mounted the old stone stairs, making his way up to the makeshift bedchamber. His eyes watered from the dirt and debris clinging to every inch of his person. He wiped one filthy hand across his brow. Thankfully,

he'd traveled with extra clothing. Not the most fashionable garments, but they would suffice for now. If he meant to stick around for more than a few days—and he believed he did—he'd have to expand his wardrobe.

A grin pulled at his mouth. What would Rebecca wear this evening? He quickened his pace, taking two steps at a time. Would she truly act as though he were invisible? An intense feeling of excitement flooded his body at the thought.

Camden wasted no time washing and dressing. Within an hour, he looked every bit a gentleman and had departed for the Chesterfield's estate.

The whisper of voices mixed with laughter bubbled from the crowded music room as he entered. Camden stiffened for a heartbeat, then drew in a cleansing breath before stepping across the threshold. Rebecca wouldn't brush him off this time. He wouldn't allow her to.

A crush of elegantly clad gentlemen and ladies filled the space, but his gaze went directly to the pianoforte. Rebecca stood beside the instrument, her cheeks flushed a becoming shade of pink. Her voice soothed his soul, chasing away the tension in his muscles. The room seemed to empty of everyone, save for the two of them.

He could listen to her sweet soprano for eternity without complaint. His pulse beat in his throat, keeping rhythm with her song. He moved closer. She stood with one rounded hip cocked toward the pianoforte, her eyes sparkling.

“Captain Beauchamp.”

A hand clapped Camden's shoulder, startling him. Camden glanced sideways to find Lord Chesterfield grinning at him.

“I’m pleased you joined the party. My daughters are entertaining us for a spot.” Lord Chesterfield nodded toward Rebecca and the woman seated next to her at the pianoforte.

“They are quite talented, my lord.” Camden allowed a smile before his gaze drifted to Rebecca once again.

“They get it from their mother. Have you been introduced to my dear wife?” Lord Chesterfield surveyed the crowded room. “Lady Chesterfield is a lovely woman and I know she’d like to meet you, Captain.”

Camden lifted a glass of claret from a passing servant’s tray. “I would be happy to make her acquaintance, my lord.”

Lord Chesterfield turned, then waved toward an elegant woman. “There she is now.”

The woman came to stand next to Lord Chesterfield, her hazel eyes warm and a welcoming smile on her lips.

“Captain Camden Beauchamp, allow me to introduce our hostess, my delightful wife, Lady Chesterfield.”

Camden bowed over Lady Chesterfield’s hand. “It is a pleasure to meet you, my lady.”

Her smile broadened. “Welcome to our home, Captain Beauchamp.” She turned to her husband. “I trust the captain will be introduced to our daughters.”

“He has already met Lady Rebecca and will be introduced to Lady Phoebe as well.”

“Splendid,” Lady Chesterfield said, her gaze moving to a nearby couple. “Do excuse us Captain Beauchamp.”

Camden barely registered their departure, his gaze firmly fixed on Rebecca. As she sang the last words of the song, her

gaze brushed past him. Had she noticed him in the crush, or did he blend in with the masses?

She leaned close to her sister, the curls around her face dancing with her movements. When she straightened, both ladies looked in his direction. Rebecca lifted one honey-colored brow at him. His pulse increased. Was she cross with him for coming, or happy to see him?

Her face gave no clues. He shrugged a shoulder while searching her expression. She nodded toward the door, disappearing through it a moment later.

Camden swallowed past the tightness in his throat, glancing around the room. Had anyone else noticed her brazen invitation? By the looks of it, everyone was engaged in conversation or distracted by drinks and food.

He strolled across the room, making his way toward the door. Sweat gathered on his palms as he moved into the long hallway. He liked to be the one in control, but for now he had little choice other than to let Rebecca take the lead, for he would not turn down an opportunity to speak with her.

The sharp, echoing thud of his footfalls reverberated against the polished marble floor as he made his way down the long hallway. Candles flickered along the corridor, casting shadows that danced along the walls and floor. He peered into each room he passed—a drawing room with thick velvet curtains and overstuffed armchairs; a library with shelves lined from end to end with leather-bound books; a game room with a billiards table and well-stocked sideboard. But none of them contained Rebecca.

Where had the minx gone? He paused at the next door, hearing the sound of skirts rustling, and peeked inside.

Rebecca reached out and grabbed his jacket lapel. She tugged him into the office, closing the door behind them. Her green eyes blazed. “Why are you here?”

“I told you I would attend when we spoke earlier.” He grinned. “I mean to become better acquainted with you.”

She strolled over to a large window. Her elegant fingers smoothed a fold in the velvet drapes. “You are wasting your time.”

He needed common ground. Something that interested her more than her desire to be rid of him. Something like... Almerry. “Tell me. How many times have you breached my castle’s walls?”

Rebecca spun on him, a light blush upon her cheeks. “What are you accusing me of, Captain?”

He could not fight his smirk. “We both know I speak the truth. On at least one occasion, you strolled through Almerry’s gate.”

She placed her hands on her hips. “I came after an intruder. How was I to know you were actually the owner?”

“I do not begrudge your actions. You simply took me by surprise when you marched into my stable and ordered me from my land.” He moved to sit on a nearby chaise. Perhaps if he looked less formidable, she would soften. “In truth, I quite admire you for it. Now tell me, how many times have you visited Almerry?”

“This is ridiculous,” she said, then strode toward the door.

Camden stood and placed himself in front of the exit. “Today, I found you by the postern gate. Do you visit often?” He offered a smile he hoped was friendly. “There is no need to

be defensive. You have leave to enter Almerry whenever you wish.”

“I do?” She blinked at him, her lips parting in surprise. “Why?”

“Because I believe you care for the castle.”

Rebecca’s shoulders relaxed a measure. She looked at him, silent for long heartbeats. It seemed he had her attention at last. A strange pull formed in his chest. “I realize you mean no harm to Almerry. I daresay you may even care for it more than I do.” He took a step closer.

“The castle fascinates me. For as far back as I can remember, I have been quite taken with Almerry.”

“You have?”

She nodded. “The legends of your ancestors, the love they were rumored to share, I find it all very inspiring.” A warm smile lifted the corners of her mouth. “Do you know the locals claim you can hear them call to each other on still nights? Have you heard of Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel’s legend?”

Merriment coursed through him at his small victory. At least for this moment, he had won Rebecca over. He was not fool enough to believe the war between them over, but he was the clear victor of their current battle.

A hollowness filled his chest at the foolish notion. His ambition had been to win her friendship, and it seemed he had. He had no further reason to remain in her company, no reason to attend the remainder of the party. Why did he find the idea so unsettling? He should be celebrating, not contemplating further skirmishes.

“You do not have to tell me.” She reached for the door.

“Wait,” he said.

She met his gaze. “Whatever for?”

“As enchanting as the legend is, there are no ghosts at Almerry.”

The doorknob rattled. Rebecca’s face paled. She leaned her weight against the door. “Hurry,” she whispered as she tugged him behind the curtain.

His heart leaped, his pulse hammering as he pulled her close behind the heavy velvet, his back pressed to the cool glass of the window while his insides burned with newly kindled desire.

“Rebecca, are you in here? Mother and Father are looking for you.” A moment later, the door clicked shut.

Camden released the breath he’d been holding.

She glanced up at him, green eyes dark and lips parted. He could no more prevent himself from kissing her than he could stop the tides from rising. He brought his lips to hers and tasted the sweetness of her mouth, his arms tight around her waist. She hesitated only a moment before meeting his demand. She parted her lips, her tongue sliding against his, and the world fell away until all he could feel was her body pressed against his, the softness of her lips against his feeding the fire of his desire.

When they finally broke apart, both panting and flushed, Camden realized with a start what they had done. It was foolish and reckless, but he couldn’t find it within himself to regret it. He had kissed Rebecca, and it was the most exhilarating thing he had ever done.

She looked up at him, her eyes dark with desire and lips kiss-swollen. “We should return to the party.”

Camden nodded, his heart feeling full in a way it never had before. "I'll go first," he said before slipping out of the room and making his way back to the music room, eager to leave before his body betrayed him again.

Six



Rebecca tugged on her horse's reins, slowing the animal as she neared Almerry's gatehouse. Would Camden accept her apology for the way she'd behaved with him? How would he treat her once she'd trotted through his gates? Would he continue to be the man she'd spoken to last—the one who kissed her—or would he revert to the brute she'd first met?

Her stomach knotted and a wave of nervousness crashed through her as she thought about it. She knew she shouldn't care what his impression of her was—and yet, there was something about him that enthralled her.

Rebecca had noted how handsome Camden was upon their first meeting. Tall and broad of shoulder with dark hair and piercing blue eyes. He was enough to make any lady swoon. And the way he'd kissed her... Her heart fluttered at the memories.

Even when he'd spoken to her in such a rude way, she'd found herself enthralled by his good looks. Then she'd discovered he was a soldier. The vexation his earlier words had caused in her morphed into a burning dislike overshadowing her initial attraction. Soldiers were not to be desired or befriended unless wished to invite heartache, and

she most certainly did not. Still, he'd garnered a spark of interest within her.

Their meeting in the office caused her initial interest to bloom. Two days had passed, and she'd attempted to keep Camden from her mind, but to no avail. When he'd given her such generous leave to visit the castle, he'd weakened her resolve. Then he'd kissed her, leaving her in an unfamiliar state of longing that shattered her resolve. Soldier or no, Captain Camden Beauchamp captivated her. She sighed. It was impossible to despise such a man as he.

Her eyelids fluttered closed. She could no longer fight him, and she owed him an apology of her own. Her ill manners had been uncalled for and most unladylike.

She drew a deep breath and steered her mount through the opening. There would be no turning back now. Not that she wished to. Rebecca had no desire to turn around. She needed to set things right between them.

Rebecca took a deep breath and straightened her back as she continued toward the gatehouse. As she approached the bailey, her breath caught. Camden stood in the center of the bailey clad in nothing more than a pair of tan breeches. The muscles in his back corded, arms stretched above his head. She stared at him, jaw slack, her gaze trailing over his exposed skin, sun-kissed and glistening. She was mesmerized.

The loud whinny of her horse interrupted Camden, and he spun around. A flush of heat washed over her face, tingling down her neck and chest—he had caught her ogling him. Embarrassment swelled in her as she contemplated what he must think of her now. She wanted to turn away and flee, but found herself unable to move, captivated by the sight before her.

“Rebecca.” His eyes danced as he reached for his nearby shirt. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

She averted her gaze to the old stone wall. If her cheeks got any hotter, she’d incinerate. What had she been thinking to blatantly ogle him as she had? He likely thought her some sort of wanton, no better than a harlot, come to gape at his exquisite form.

“I’m decent now,” he said, his tone carrying a hint of laughter.

His deep voice unfurled a fresh wave of longing deep in her core. She wrapped one arm around her stomach. She had to get away from him. She should speak her piece and go before she embarrassed herself further.

He stepped in front of her, reaching for her horse’s reins. “Allow me to assist you.”

She glanced at him, met his gaze just long enough to speak. “I am sorry for the way I treated you.” The tremor in her voice made her cringe.

He gave a devilish grin. “I rather like how you’ve been treating me.”

Her eyes narrowed at the amusement in his gaze. How dare he make fun of her? She’d been right to dislike him, after all. The reprobate enjoyed her discomfort. He was certainly not a gentleman.

She sucked in a shallow breath. “I...I only came to apologize for my poor treatment of you, and now I have. I’ll be on my way.”

He held tight to her reins, his gaze sweeping her face. His brows drew together.

“Please release my horse. I would like to be on my way.” She glanced at the gatehouse. Her pulse racing.

“Are you certain you can’t stay a bit longer? Perhaps join me in a turn around the bailey? I would like to be friends.” His tone was soft and steady.

Heaven help her, but he looked so sincere. What would a short walk hurt? She gave a nod of ascent and he reached up to help her dismount. She slid from the saddle and into his arms. Once her feet touched the ground, he stepped back, releasing her. An odd yet comforting sensation lingered in her skin where he had touched her.

“Allow me to secure your mount. I will only be a minute.” Camden smiled at her as he led the horse toward the stable.

She pressed the backs of her fingers to her lips as he walked away. A part of her wanted to call out for him to return her mount so she could leave. Yet her stomach fluttered over the idea of spending time with him.

What could she be thinking? One second Rebecca was filled with anger toward this man, then a heartbeat later she wanted to throw herself into his arms. With a heavy breath, she lowered her hand and looked around.

The summer sun shone down on her, its vibrant light casting shadows around the castle’s bailey. She squinted, blocking the light with her arm as her gaze returned to the stable door. When Camden strode out, she made her way over to him. There was no reason for her to stay in the middle of the bailey, waiting for him like a lovesick fool—which she most certainly was not.

Camden offered her his arm, and she wound her hand through the crook of his elbow, allowing him to guide her

toward the curtain wall encasing Almerry. An awkward silence hung in the air between them. She could feel her pulse beating, her stomach fluttering—this was ridiculous. Rebecca only wished to befriend him because of Almerry. She had no romantic inclinations toward him. There was no reason at all to be demure. And yet...

Rebecca snuck a glance at him from the corner of her eye. Ridiculous, indeed. She inhaled a cleansing breath, then said, “I have always wondered about the damage to the postern gate and surrounding wall. It seems to be caused from more than age and disrepair. The large hole to the left of the gate has long fascinated me.”

“Then you do not know the legend of Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel in its entirety.”

“I fear not, but would very much like to.” She’d spent years wondering about the badly damaged gate and arched portion of wall. “You will tell me, won’t you?” She tilted her head toward him.

“According to family tales, Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel fought side by side to reclaim Almerry from the Scottish. The enemy troops used greek fire to breach the gate, gaining entry to the castle. Lady Isabel and Sir Ariston amassed an army and arrived in time to prevent the enemy from taking the keep. They fought side by side, and though Lady Isabel suffered the slash of a blade during the battle, but her injury did not stop her from defending her home.” He placed his hand over Rebecca’s, where it rested on his arm. “Lady Isabel and Sir Ariston were married shortly after the battle and remained at each other’s side for the rest of their lives.”

She tossed a glance back at the gate, her gaze roaming over the damaged sandstone. Could his tale be true? It

certainly fit with the tales of their great love story. “Legend has it Lady Isabel and Sir Ariston were told by a seer that their children would be legends in their own right.”

“Sir Ariston was part of a long line of feared and valiant knights. Every Beauchamp male for centuries has made a name for himself as a capable and respected knight or soldier. It is a family tradition.”

Her gut clinched, the air freezing in her lungs. She’d been enjoying their time together so much she’d forgotten what he was. Forgotten why he was not for her. A dangerous slip, for she could easily fall for him. Her mood soured, and she glanced back at the gatehouse.

“Are you unwell? Your face has gone pale.” He drew them to a stop and slipped his arm around her. His gaze searching hers. Lines furrowed his brow, but his blue eyes were soft.

“I’m perfectly fine. The chatter of war simply brought back old memories. My brother, Roland... He lost his life fighting against Napoleon’s forces. I’m afraid I will never be able to put his loss behind me.” She swallowed the lump forming in her throat. She’d never spoken to anyone outside her immediate family about Roland’s death. Why had she told Camden?

“I’m sorry for your loss. I was unaware.” He pulled her against him. “War is often an ugly business. Far too many great men have been lost to it.”

For a moment, she allowed her head to rest against his chest. The sound of his heartbeat and warmth of his body comforted her. Standing here with him, pressed against him, she felt safe, cared for. Except she couldn’t find comfort with him. Not in the arms of a soldier. She stepped from his embrace.

“Let us speak of something else.” She took his arm once more. “Have you explored the castle? I mean, beyond the rooms you are occupying.”

He led her toward the turn of the wall that would bring them around the other side of the bailey. “I looked around a bit when I arrived, but I’ve not been in every chamber, nor have I entered the fifth floor.”

“I should like to spend some time inside. Who knows what treasures remain?”

“If it is your wish to explore the keep, then you shall.”

“Truly?” She beamed at him, her heart swelling. She’d always wanted to enter the keep, but never had she allowed herself the pleasure. So far as she was concerned, Almerry had belonged to Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel. She’d not trespass on their home uninvited. Only now Almerry belonged to Camden, and he’d invited her. Her lips turned up in a wide smile. “You cannot possibly know how happy you have made me.”

He brought them to a halt and stepped in front of her. With one of his bone melting gazes, he reached up and cupped her cheek. “I rather like making you happy.”

Her stomach fluttered. Heat fanned out from where his hand rested on her face. He rubbed his fingers across the tender skin of her neck, just below her ear. Her pulse sped, and she tipped her chin up, inviting his kiss.

He brought his lips to hers, startlingly gentle for such a large man. Her entire body trembled with need. Her arms slid around his neck of their own accord while she rose onto her tiptoes. Heavenly. His kiss could be described in no other way.

He tilted her head, deepening the kiss. Heat engulfed her entire body. She was completely lost in the sensations

consuming her. His warmth invaded her, his muscled body formed to hers, his soft but demanding lips possessed hers, and she was lost. She opened for him, giving him all she had to offer. Taking and giving without reservation.

He embraced her hungrily, his palms a burning brand against her skin. She trembled in response, pushing her fingers into his hair and pressing her mouth hard against his. His tongue danced with hers, igniting an inferno of passion that threatened to consume her whole. Mercy. She had never felt anything so powerful, so intensely passionate as his kisses. Her heart reverberated with warnings—Camden was dangerous. This desire between them was dangerous. It had to stop.

With a monumental act of will, she tore herself away from him and stumbled backward out of his arms. Breathless, she said, “We cannot do this again.” Rebecca averted her gaze, cheeks burning.

Emotions clouded his gaze, and he released a sigh. “I’ll retrieve your mount.”

She focused on the sound of his retreating footsteps as she worked to bring her body under control. What had she been thinking of yielding to him in such a way? And not for the first time. She would not, could not, allow it to happen again. She had to protect her heart and her virtue.

An absurd sadness settled over her, deep as any loss. With the way he affected her, there was no other choice. Rebecca had to guard her heart. She’d have to take care to avoid him from this moment on.

Seven



C amden ran his hand over the old wood trunk's intricate carvings. He should be well on his way home by now, not wandering around the dilapidated walls of Almerry, mooning over a lady. He'd been at the castle for nearly a fortnight. By now, his family would expect him home. Yet... He was spending his time repairing the castle and dreaming of the lady next door.

He'd not seen Rebecca since the day he'd kissed her in the bailey, nearly a sennight ago, but she never left his thoughts for long. The memory still scorched him, leaving him longing for her.

She'd captured more than his interest, her hold on him undeniable. What had started as a brief respite in the country had morphed into something entirely unexpected when he'd met her—when he'd kissed her. She felt the spark between them, too. He could see it in her eyes, feel it in her touch.

She'd felt the same desire to be near him, to touch him as he felt toward her. The evidence was plain in the way she'd wrapped her arms around him, pressed nearer to him, met his demands with her sweet mouth and roaming hands.

So why was she now avoiding him like one did the plague? What was she afraid of? He was determined to find out.

Determined to have her in his life. But how could he overcome her objections if he never saw her again?

An astounding need to be near her drove him to her estate each day, but the lady never showed herself. Nor did she seek him out at Almerry Castle. He rubbed one hand across his chin, his chest tightening. She'd even refused to see him when he'd called on her to tell her of the trunk.

His muscles coiled at the memory of her refusal to see him. He'd spent a considerable amount of time searching nearly every crevice of the old castle, seeking something to share with her, an excuse to call on her. For days, he turned up nothing other than dust and grime. Not so much as a leather strap had been left behind over the centuries. He'd been about to admit defeat this morning when he'd happened upon the old carved trunk tucked into a corner crevice of the lower-level storage room. His heart had skipped a beat as he'd stood staring at it.

How was it intact after all this time? The oak trunk was at least four feet long, massive, and far too heavy to move on his own. He'd left it there and gone to tell Rebecca about it, planning to gift the trunk to her. But after all of his effort, she had turned him away.

He glanced down at the large oak trunk in front of him, desperately wishing to share it with her. No one would appreciate it more than Rebecca. She would wonder who left it here. Wonder if there was anything inside. How he longed to make the discovery with her. Alas, she refused to speak with him.

His own curiosity piqued, and he reached for the iron latch, but jerked his hand back. Rebecca should be the one to

open the trunk's lid. She was the whole reason he'd spent so much time searching the chambers of Almerry.

A strange tug pulled at his chest when the image of her smile flooded his thoughts. If something were inside, he wanted to share the discovery with her. He wanted to be the one who made her smile. He'd left a note for her this morning telling her about the trunk. Surely her love for Almerry and its legend would compel her to reply. He would simply have to be patient until she did.

Camden stood to make his way out to the bailey. He wanted to be out there waiting for her when she arrived.

If she arrived.

She would come. Rebecca loved Almerry and longed to know the castle's history too much to ignore such a find as that trunk. No other well-bred lady would have followed his light and investigated its source. She cared deeply for the castle and its propertied ghosts.

She would come.

But what if she did not? What if her desire to avoid him was stronger than her pull toward the castle?

His stomach knotted.

She would come, he reassured himself again. She loved Almerry and its legends too much to turn her back on a piece of its history.

He stumbled clumsily down the ancient stone staircase, his attention focused elsewhere. Missing a stair, he slid abruptly down the remaining steps, his arms reaching for purchase until he crashed into the stone wall at the bottom. A stab of pain shot through him, his breath coming in short gasps as he

sagged against the wall. After a moment, he cautiously straightened and stepped away from the wall.

“Camden. My God, are you all right?” Rebecca rushed toward him, her sister close on her heels.

He glanced up at her, his heart warming at the concern reflected in her eyes. “I’m fine. I was just coming down to wait for you.”

Her cheeks flushed a brilliant shade of crimson. “I’m sorry, I did not think... You gave me permission before... I...we should have waited outside.” She tossed a glance at her sister. Lady Phoebe only grinned, laughter in her hazel eyes.

“No, it’s quite alright. I gave you leave to enter at your will. I’ll not take it away from you now.”

Rebecca’s shoulders rounded ever so slightly and a bright smile lit her pretty face. “Are you hurt?”

“Nothing I cannot shake off,” he said, then forced his attention away from Rebecca. “Lady Phoebe, a pleasure to see you again.” He swallowed his disappointment. She was a lovely lady, but he’d wanted to be alone with Rebecca. It was the very reason he’d given the few servants he had tasks to keep them away from the storage areas below. How was he to speak plainly with Rebecca now?

Phoebe nodded. “Likewise. If you wouldn’t mind, Captain, I’d like to take a turn around the bailey while the two of you inspect the treasure you found.”

His heart soared at her words, and he gave a nod of approval.

Rebecca placed her hand on Phoebe’s arm. “Do you not want to see its contents?”

Camden shot Phoebe a grateful smile before settling his gaze back on Rebecca. “We can share what we find with her before the two of you take your leave.”

“I should like that.” Phoebe stepped toward the large arched entry door. “I simply have no desire to wander the dusty keep when I could take in the fresh air out of doors.”

“No need to explain, Lady Phoebe. You are welcome to explore the outside all you wish.” Camden moved to the entry. He pulled the heavy wood door open. “Do be careful around the ruined outbuildings. I fear they are not at all safe.”

“I will take care. Thank you, sir,” Phoebe said, then stepped past him.

He closed the door, a spring in his step. If he had to guess, he’d say Lady Phoebe knew exactly what she was doing, leaving Rebecca alone with him. He had seen a hint of mischief in her eyes.

Clasping his hands behind his back to keep from pulling Rebecca into his arms, he turned to her. She stared at the closed door, cheeks still stained pink, eyes rounded. “It’s not a good idea for us to be alone.”

“Why ever not?” He captured her gaze and smirked.

“It’s not proper. We should have a chaperone.” She strode toward the door. “It is why I brought my sister along.”

He caught her arm, stilling her. “What are you afraid of?” His fingers tingled where they touched her.

She notched her chin up. “I’m not afraid. I would simply like to avoid scandal.”

“In that case, let us go open the trunk.” He winked. “Your sister will safeguard your reputation.” Lady Phoebe did not

make an appropriate chaperone, and he well knew it. Rebecca had brought her as a shield, nothing more.

She swallowed, her eyes fluttering closed for an instant. “Very well. Where is the trunk?”

He grinned with satisfaction as he retrieved a lantern. “Follow me. And watch your step.” He wanted to offer his arm, provide her balance as they made their way down the stairs, but he had no wish to upset her. After what he went through to get her here, the last thing he wanted was to give her a reason to flee.

He glanced back at her as he descended the stairs. She followed a few feet behind, her head bent and skirts clutched in one hand. He fought the urge to sweep her into his arms. To show her how he felt and what she meant to him.

“We’re almost there.” Camden held the lantern in front of him as he turned the corner into the storage room.

The lantern illuminated the space, casting a warm glow on the floor and walls. Rebecca gasped, “it is beautiful,” then moved past him to the trunk. She ran her hand over the lid, a slow reverent touch. When she looked up, her gaze was much softer than it had been a moment ago. “Do you think it belonged to Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel?”

Camden moved to stand beside her. “It appears old enough to have been theirs. The iron latches and style of the trunk look to be medieval and there is considerable rust.”

“Is there anything inside?” She bent and feathered her fingers over one latch.

“I did not open it. I wanted you to be the one to do so.”

She met his gaze, eyes sparkling. “Me?”

“I can think of no one else who would experience greater joy in doing so.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “You love Almerry, and it was your idea to explore the keep. You’ve earned the right to open this treasure.”

She crouched in front of the trunk. The hinges creaked as she tried to lift the heavy oak lid. She glanced back at him through thick lashes.

He nodded, waiting for her to continue.

With both hands, she pushed hard against the top of the trunk. The old iron hinges protested, the lid unmistakably rusted shut. He kneeled beside her, desire flaring deep within him when their shoulders touched. “Maybe together we can get it to open?”

She placed her hands back on the old oak top. Camden did the same, and both gave a huge heave. Inch by inch the lid creaked open until they revealed the contents. Rebecca gasped and looked up at him. “How is this possible?”

“I don’t pretend to know. It defies logic that such items could remain intact after so many centuries. Perhaps it is not as old as I suspected.”

She reached into the trunk, her hand hovering just above the contents. “It appears to be clothing, but there is something else here, too.” She pointed at the far inside edge. “It looks like metal, silver maybe.”

“Perhaps it is chain mail.”

“These could be Lady Isabel and Sir Ariston’s garments.” Her eyes sparkled as she feathered her fingers over the red cloth inside. “This is amazing.”

“It belongs to you now.” His heart swelled at having been the one to give her such an incredible gift.

She beamed at him before wrapping her arms around him. “I shall treasure it always.”

He couldn't help from trailing his hand along her back, relishing the feel of her while fighting the urge to capture her lips. “I will speak with your father about having the trunk moved to your residence.”

She pulled back. “No. I wish for it to remain here. This is where it belongs, at least for now.” She turned to the trunk. “It has been here for hundreds of years. It seems wrong to move it.”

“Then it shall stay and you can visit it any time you wish. I will see the trunk moved to the second floor entrance hall, and there it will remain.”

“Thank you.” She lifted the deep red fabric, using only her index finger. “I fear it will crumble into dust if I attempt to handle it overmuch.” She nibbled at her lip. “Let us leave it for now.”

When she met his gaze, he surveyed her face. A lump formed in his throat. “Why have you been avoiding me? You say you are not afraid of anything, but your actions betray you.”

She narrowed her eyes. “My actions? What of yours? Did you not steal a kiss from me? Are you not the same man who told me I should be afraid of you when we first met?” She stood and placed her hands on her hips.

“As I recall, you kissed me back. Ardently.” He stepped closer until his chest pressed against her soft breasts. To her credit, she did not run. He smiled. “I am quite certain you enjoyed being kissed. Both times.”

A blush tinted her cheeks and her eyes darkened. “Are you mad?” she asked, averting her gaze.

He gently palmed her cheek, bringing her gaze back to his. “The way I make you feel frightens you. You think by avoiding me, you can make whatever is between us disappear.”

“There is noth—”

“Do not insult yourself by denying what lies between us. I see the truth in your eyes, feel it in your touch. You think of me often, long to feel my lips on yours again.”

“You are completely out of bounds. Do not presume to know my thoughts. I’d rather kiss a pig than you.” She turned her back to him but made no move to leave.

“Let us test your theory, shall we?” He spun her back to him and brought his lips down on hers—hard, demanding.

For a moment, she stood stock-still. His stomach rolled. Had she meant what she’d said? Did she feel nothing when they were together? Devil take it, he was a fool. He relented, taking his lips from hers, but then her arms came around him and she tilted her head, giving him better access to the sweetness of her mouth.

He deepened the kiss, pulling her tight against him. His body heated, every nerve tingled, every fiber of his being cried out for her. He broke from her lips, trailing kisses across her cheek, down her neck, across her collarbone.

A soft moan trembled from her as she clung to him. He worked his way across the swell of her breasts, and she arched against him. His hands roamed her curves, finding pleasure in each new discovery. She was so responsive to his touch, he

almost lost control. With great reluctance, he pulled away from her before his need became too great.

He rested his forehead against hers and shuddered out a breath. “Would you still prefer a pig?”

She opened her eyes, heavy with desire, and looked up at him. Her voice was barely a whisper when she spoke. “No... that was...”

He smiled and brushed a stray lock of hair from her face. “Only the beginning of what we could share.”

He wanted all of her, but not like this. Not in a storage room in the heat of their battle. She deserved better. He pulled back, his gaze holding hers. “May I call on you tomorrow?”

She ran her tongue across her kiss-swollen lips. Her eyes lowered and her chest rose on a shaky breath. He could see the battle waging within her. Which would win out? Her desire or her fear.

Rebecca met his gaze and nodded.

Eight



Rebecca paced across the parlor. What had she been thinking, agreeing to let Camden call on her? Desire had clouded her judgement. There could be nothing between them. She'd not allow herself to wind up like Daphne, a young widow with a baby living off the charity of her in-laws.

Tears clouded her eyes, and she brushed them away. Her heart ached for Daphne and her nephew as much as it broke for herself and what could have been between her and Camden. She sniffled, then resumed pacing.

The war had ended. Perhaps she had no reason to fear a relationship with Camden. So long as there was no war, he could not die in battle. Besides, he'd not asked for her hand. He had merely asked to call on her. She turned and stalked back across the room.

"Would you please cease that incessant pacing? You're making me dizzy." Phoebe sighed, placing her needlepoint on the mahogany table beside her. "You act like you are headed for the gallows."

Rebecca stopped at the window. "I may well be."

Phoebe arched one brow. "Don't be so dramatic. Captain Beauchamp is a perfectly respectable gentleman, and Mother arranged for you to be chaperoned."

Rebecca peered out the window toward the long drive leading to her home. If Phoebe knew how disreputable Camden truly was, she would forbid the courtship herself. Rebecca touched her lips, recalling the kisses she and Camden had shared. Her stomach fluttered. Would he kiss her again? She hoped he would. Her cheeks warmed, and she waved her fan in an attempt to cool them.

She belonged in Bedlam for having such a thought. Even more so for surrendering to him, as she had. He could have carried her up to his bed and she would not have complained so long as he continued to kiss her. She was not safe with him. Not as long as her body betrayed her in such a way. And now her heart threatened to falter.

She turned back to Phoebe. "I cannot go through with this. Tell him I have a headache. I am going to my room." She moved toward the parlor door.

Phoebe stood, her eyes rounded, jaw slackened. "I will do no such thing." She stepped into Rebecca's path. "You agreed to spend time with him today, and you shall. Now stop being a goose."

"I am not being a goose. I have legitimate reasons for not wanting to be around him." She slapped her fan against her leg.

"Being a soldier is not a legitimate reason for refusing a courtship." Phoebe placed her hand on Rebecca's shoulder. "Roland would not have wished for you to behave in such a way. Our brother loved being a soldier and knew the risk he took. He was brave and took pride in fighting for England. You do him no honor by behaving as you are."

Rebecca's eyes stung with unshed tears, and she blinked them away. "Sometimes I hate him for getting killed, and for

leaving us and his sweet baby behind. Nothing is the same anymore. I miss him so much.” She sniffed and dabbed a handkerchief to the corner of her eyes. “I will not become like Daphne. My heart breaks anew every time I see her.”

“I understand, I swear I do. But it makes no difference who you marry. You cannot guarantee they will live as long as you do. People die young every day and war is seldom the culprit.” Phoebe patted Rebecca’s shoulder. “Just consider it. Allow yourself to get to know Captain Beauchamp before you toss him aside.”

Feet shuffled, and Rebecca turned to the door. Her butler stood in the entrance. A maid scurried past him, taking up her station in the corner. Her stomach turned as she waited for the butler to speak.

“Captain Beauchamp to see Lady Rebecca.” He gave a bow, then backed from the parlor.

Camden strolled in, offering one of his toe curling smiles that made Rebecca’s insides quiver. “Good day, Lady Phoebe. Lady Rebecca.” He bowed.

Rebecca’s pulse sped. Her mind screamed at her to make an excuse to get away, but her legs refused to move. The mere sight of him captivated her. Long muscular legs in tan breeches, tapered waste and broad shoulders scarcely disguised by his elegant navy day coat and starched white cravat. His blue eyes shone in stark contrast to his dark, windblown hair. He was the handsomest gentleman she’d ever seen.

“Good day to you as well, Captain Beauchamp. If you will excuse me, I was just on my way to answer some letters.” Phoebe curtsied, giving him a welcoming smile.

Rebecca narrowed her eyes at Phoebe. How could her sister run off knowing how badly she did not want to spend time alone with Camden? She'd done the same thing at Almerry. Why did she seem so determined to push them together?

"Yes, of course." He stepped aside, allowing Phoebe to sweep past him and out of the room.

Rebecca watched her disappear through the door in a flurry of yellow skirts. The fluttering returned to her belly the moment she met Camden's gaze. She rested a hand on her abdomen. "I'll ring for refreshments. Please have a seat."

He stepped closer to her. "I thought we might enjoy a stroll through the garden, but if you would rather stay inside, I am happy to join you on the settee."

She swallowed hard, heat fanning through her like flames being stoked in the hearth. Fresh air might do her some good. She glanced out the window. "A walk sounds lovely."

He proffered his arm. From the moment she slid her hand around his bicep, she regretted the closeness. The heat raging inside her increased as he led her into the grand foyer. After she accepted her parasol from the butler, Camden donned his hat and led her outside. He looked even more dashing with that dratted hat.

The day was warm, but a cooling breeze danced around her. She opened her parasol, grateful for the shade it cast. Birdsong drifted from the distance. If only she could spread her wings and fly away. But would she really choose to do so? Probably not, for she was drawn to Camden and the flames he stoked within her.

She glanced over her shoulder to ensure the maid followed at a distance. Not that it truly mattered, as one would be hard pressed to consider a maid as a respectable chaperone. Still, it was preferable to being alone with Camden. And they were out of doors where anyone could see them. Yes, a walk was a good way to spend her time with him.

“Lady Chesterfield tells me there is to be a ball.” He guided her onto a path running along the garden’s edge. “Might I request the first dance?”

Rebecca’s breath hitched at the idea of his arms holding her for all the world to see. She both longed for and feared his touch. It was unfair of her to lead him on. The kindest thing she could do would be to end this thing blooming between them. Yet her heart refused to cut ties. Could she truly continue to fight this pull between them? Did she even wish to?

Phoebe’s words echoed in the forefront of her mind. She was indeed being a goose. Her sister was right. Camden would depart for his family home before long. He’d told Father as much. Once he was gone, her life would return to normal. No harm would come from allowing him to court her for a short time.

Not as long as they remained properly chaperoned, and there would be plenty of prying eyes at the ball. She would need to enlist one of the older married women or a widow as chaperone. Besides, she enjoyed Camden’s company.

Having made up her mind, she met his gaze and said, “I should like that.”

He tightened his hold on her arm, his hand coming to rest over hers. “I look forward to our dance and long to hold you in my arms once more.”

Her heart fluttered at his eloquent words. When she glanced at him, the sincerity in his eyes took her breath away. The possibility of losing her heart to him made her throat tighten. She averted her gaze to the flowering bushes they were strolling past and wondered if losing her heart to him would truly be so bad. He was handsome and kind. Strong and witty. Honorable even if foolish, and clearly loyal. She wagered he would make a steady and true husband.

“I had your treasure moved up to the entry hall. Now you can attend it without my having to worry about your safety.”

“You worry about me?” Her words came out whisper-soft.

“Never have I met a lady who charges head first into danger, as you do, Rebecca. I suspect I will never meet another. I admire your fearlessness and determination, but it also frightens me. I’d not have you hurting yourself if I can help it.”

Her defenses crumbled, and she moved closer to his side. “I would hardly be in danger going down to the storage room.”

“Believe me, those stairs are treacherous.” His voice held a teasing lilt.

She stifled a laugh. She’d been terrified for him when she saw him nearly tumble down them. But now the scene proved rather humorous. His expression as he lost his balance with his arms flailing about ran through her mind. A set of steps had bested the skilled soldier. “Indeed they are, she agreed.”

He led her toward an iron bench. “Might we sit for a spell?”

She nodded, then moved to sit. “Father tells me you plan to depart for London. What are your plans for Almerry Castle?” The bench’s cool surface seeped through her skirts as she

spoke. The shade of a large lime tree offered cooling shade, and she closed her parasol, placing it across her lap.

“When I first arrived, I was planning to return to London, though I am now considering a more permanent stay.” He settled next to her, angling his body toward hers. “I’m considering restoring the castle and making it my permanent home. I find that Northumberland suits me.”

Her breath caught. “I wish you would not.”

His gaze jerked to her, his expression clouding with hurt.

“I mean to say that I wish you would not restore Almerry. Not that I wish you to leave.”

He blew out a slow breath, his gaze turning curious. “It would not please you to see the castle returned to her former glory.”

“I have always thought of Almerry as a memorial to Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel. Their story found its beginning and end within the castle’s walls. It seems wrong to change Almerry, as it is a testament to their love.” She fidgeted with a fold in her skirt, a touch embarrassed at her admission. “Of course, you own the castle now.” She looked up at him through her lashes. “It is yours to do with as you choose.”

“I have no wish to change the castle.” He placed his hand over hers, stilling it. “I rather like your way of looking at Almerry. I only wish to bring it back to life. I want to stay true to the castle’s original design and finishes.”

“You do?” She bit her lip. “I think Lady Isabel and Sir Ariston would like that.”

“I quite agree.” He looked across the garden toward Almerry in the distance. “As far as I am aware, no one has lived at Almerry since they did. The castle belongs to them. I

am but its caretaker for a time and wish to do them proud. They gave me a strong heritage, one any man would be proud of. The least I can do is preserve their beloved home. And I should greatly appreciate your input and guidance.”

“You truly mean it?” Her pulse quickened, her heart leaping with joy.

“I do.” He leaned toward her. “For as long as I live, the castle will remain a monument to Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel. You have my word.”

She tipped her head, and as he leaned closer, her lips parted. He stared into her bright green eyes as he stroked her cheek. “Rebecca, I find myself rather taken—”

A scream split the surrounding air, causing the hair at the back of Rebecca’s neck to stand up. She gasped in surprise as she sprang to her feet. Camden had jerked away at the sound and hurried toward the scream. Rebecca raced after him, fisting her skirts. “That sounded like Daphne. Something’s wrong.”

Camden did not glance back. He called out, “Stay here.”

Daphne’s screams ranted the air anew, causing Rebecca’s anxiety to increase and she ran harder, ignoring Camden’s order. She pushed her legs to pump faster.

Her heart skipped a beat when she came around the corner of the stable. Daphne lay on the ground clutching her leg. Tears streaked her face. Her breaths coming in heavy pants. Camden knelt on the grass, leaning over her.

Rebecca dropped to her knees beside them. “What happened?”

“I f-fell from m-my horse,” Daphne said, her face contorting in pain.

Camden brushed Daphne's hair away from her face. "There now. Everything will be all right." He glanced at Rebecca. "I sent the stable boy after the horse."

Rebecca nodded, worry creasing her brow. "We have to get her inside and send for the physician. You carry her in. I will run ahead and send someone to fetch the doctor." She turned to the maid who had followed her. "Go ahead of us and turn down Lady Daphne's bed."

Daphne let loose a wretched scream when Camden lifted her into his arms.

Rebecca laid a hand on her shoulder. "You can trust Captain Beauchamp. He will take care of you, I promise." Rebecca waited until she nodded, then ran toward the house, her skirt hiked up to her knees.

She did not slow to look back until she'd reached the entrance. Camden followed not far behind her. Daphne had her arms wrapped around his neck, her face buried against his chest. Rebecca swallowed past the lump in her throat, drew a deep breath, and burst through the door, nearly knocking the footman who stood near the mahogany panel clear off his feet.

The footman's eyes widened. "My lady."

"Daphne is hurt. Send for the doctor at once." She turned her attention to a nearby maid. "Go get Mother. Send her to Lady Daphne's room. Go quickly."

The maid nodded, then hurried up the stairs.

Camden came through the door, Daphne red faced and sobbing in his arms. Rebecca led him to Daphne's chamber, where he placed her on the bed. Rebecca sat on the edge of the mattress, stroking Daphne's cheek.

“Mother’s coming, and the doctor as well. You are safe now.” Tears pricked at her eyes, but she fought them back. She needed to be strong for Daphne. “Mother will know how to take care of you.”

Rebecca looked up, searching the room for Camden. Her face paled. A deep scarlet stream trailed down his hand, dripping onto his breeches. “You’re bleeding.”

Nine



Camden looked down at his hand, then back at Rebecca. The worry in her gaze tugged at his heart, but also gave him hope. She must care for him to show such concern. He gave a nonchalant shake of his hand and said, “It’s nothing to worry about. I scratched it on the corner of the stable building when I ran past. It will heal.”

“It needs tending.” Rebecca glanced back at Lady Daphne.

“I’ve experienced far worse wounds. I assure you, my hand can wait.” He moved closer to Rebecca, now cradling his injured hand in his unharmed one. “It’s nothing, truly.”

She grimaced before turning her attention to the maid in the corner. “Go fetch linen strips and warm water straight away.”

Lady Chesterfield stepped into the room with Lady Phoebe on her heels. They stopped at the foot of the bed. “What happened?” Lady Chesterfield glanced at Rebecca before her gaze settled on Lady Daphne lying on the mattress.

“She was tossed from her mount. I fear her leg is broken.” Rebecca stood. “The doctor has been sent for.”

Lady Chesterfield moved to stand beside Rebecca at the edge of the bed. “Phoebe, have a servant fetch the brandy

decanter. A drink will take the edge off of her pain. Then wait for the doctor and show him up the moment he arrives.”

Phoebe nodded before disappearing from the room.

“Captain Beauchamp cut his hand, helping Daphne.” Rebecca glanced at him. “If you will excuse us, Mother. I’d like to tend to his injury.”

“Yes, do take care of the captain.” Lady Chesterfield turned her attention to him. “Captain Beauchamp, you’ve done us a great service. I thank you for it.”

He shifted his feet, uncomfortable with the praise. “I simply happened to be in the right place. Any gentleman would have done the same.”

Lady Chesterfield studied him for a moment, then nodded and turned her attention back to Daphne.

“Come. Let us see to your hand,” Rebecca said with a gentle pressure of her fingers on his arm, indicating that he should follow her out of the room.

He cradled his injury as he followed, the throbbing in his hand intensifying when he tightened his grip around it. They reached the staircase and made their way down. At the foot of the steps, Rebecca turned toward a long hall. The maid she’d sent approached with the requested supplies.

“Take them into the parlor,” Rebecca ordered. She glanced back at Camden, worry etching her features, before scurrying after the maid.

The concern she showed for him made him smile. He knew she found him attractive, enjoyed his company and his touch. But this? A person could not fake the concern radiating from her. Rebecca cared about him even if she refused to admit it.

“Sit over there.” She pointed toward a wingback chair by the hearth before moving to a nearby table.

He smirked at her tight tone, lowering himself into the chair. The maid set her burden on the mahogany table next to his seat before retreating into a corner. Rebecca took a quick survey of the items, then removed her white gloves. Her hands shook slightly as she laid a strip of linen across the table. “Give me your hand.” She reached out, holding her hand palm up.

Camden placed his injured hand on her outstretched one. Warmth spread through him at her tender touch, overshadowing the throb that had been there just moments before.

She dipped a fresh strip of the white linen into a bowl of warm lavender scented water before dabbing the damp cloth on his wound. He winced, and her gaze flickered to his. “Does it hurt terribly?”

“No, just stings a little.” He studied the gash across the top of his hand. The wound, more severe than he’d thought, stained the white linen strip scarlet. It looked as though a beast had gnawed at his flesh. Still, the wound was small, barely an inch across. A tight binding would do the trick.

“The doctor is in with Daphne. Her leg is indeed broken, and he’s sent for the surgeon to set the bone.” Phoebe said from the door. “Should I send the doctor in here when he’s finished?”

Rebecca nodded without looking up from her task.

“No, that shall not be necessary. The cut is not as bad as it appears.” Camden glanced between the two women.

Phoebe crossed the room to Rebecca's side. Her gaze focused on Camden's hand. "It looks like you caught it on a nail."

"It needs to be properly cleaned, so the wound does not fester." Rebecca wrapped a dry strip of linen around his hand. "It will do you no harm to let the doctor treat your injury."

She made a good argument. More than her words, the worry in her green eyes beseeched him. "Very well," Camden conceded.

Rebecca smiled, giving his hand a barely noticeable squeeze. "Good."

He rather preferred her smile to the worried expression she'd been wearing a moment before. It lit up her whole face, made her eyes sparkle like grass coated in morning dew. He wanted to bask in her happiness for the rest of his days.

His heart skipped a beat. Where had that come from? He had not been searching for a wife, had not even considered the idea before this moment. He looked toward the window. All he had wanted was to spend some time alone before returning to London, yet his chest tightened at the idea of leaving Rebecca.

"I will send the doctor in once he finishes with Daphne." Phoebe said. "I am going to check on her now, if you will excuse me." She nodded to him, smiled at her sister, then left the parlor.

Rebecca released his hand and said, "It was truly wonderful the way you cared for Daphne. I am sorry you hurt yourself in the process." She scooped up the soiled linen strips from the table and placed them in the bowl.

"I have no wish for praise. I did what needed doing, nothing more. I assure you I have been in far worse

situations.”

She folded the remaining clean linen strips. “How very modest of you. Nonetheless, you are a hero in my eyes.”

“In that case.” He chuckled. “I can think of other predicaments I would like to rescue you from.” His gaze swept the length of her body, a roguish gleam in his blue eyes.

She smiled and swatted his shoulder playfully. “You’re incorrigible.”

Camden leaned forward, his eyes locking on hers. “Would you like me to show you just how incorrigible I can be?”

Rebecca’s cheeks flushed as she shifted her feet, her gaze flickering to the door. “Camden, we’re in the middle of a crisis.”

“Yes, you are right.” He sighed, his shoulders slumping. “Perhaps another time.”

“Rogue,” she said, then bit her lip. Silence fell between them, the only sound the crackling of the fire in the hearth. Rebecca busied herself with rinsing the stained linen strips, her focus solely on the task at hand. Camden watched her, admiring the way her honey-blond hair fell over her shoulders in cascading waves and the way her hands moved with such grace. He wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms, to feel her warmth and breath against his skin.

A knock sounded at the door, drawing both of their attention. The doctor entered, his face lined with concern. “Lady Rebecca, Captain, the surgeon has arrived and is upstairs tending to Lady Daphne. I have come to treat Captain Beauchamp’s injury.”

Rebecca moved around to the back of Camden’s chair, gesturing for the doctor to take her place beside the wingback

chair. "Thank you, Doctor."

Camden held his hand out for the doctor to examine. The older man nodded before taking a vial of clear liquid from his bag and pouring it over the wound. Camden hissed as the liquid stung his skin. The doctor then wrapped a thick bandage around his hand, securing it in place.

"You will need to keep the wound bandaged for at least a week," the doctor said. "Change it once a day. And try not to use that hand too much. It needs time to heal."

"Thank you, Doctor," Camden said, flexing his fingers experimentally. The pain had lessened considerably, and he was thankful for the doctor's expertise.

As the doctor packed up his bag and left the room, Rebecca moved to stand in front of Camden. "I will come calling to change the bandage," she said firmly.

Camden raised an eyebrow in surprise. "I am not sure that is necessary, Rebecca. I can manage on my own."

"You will allow my help," she repeated, her voice leaving no room for argument. "It is the least I can do."

Camden couldn't help but feel a surge of affection for her. She was stubborn, but she cared deeply for those around her. "As you wish." Camden nodded. He could feel her fingers brush against his shoulder as she moved around him. He closed his eyes briefly, savoring the sensation. It was intoxicating to be this close to her, to feel her presence and know that she cared for him.

"Go home and rest. I will come to tend you tomorrow, and each day after for the prescribed sennight," she said.

And for the first time in his life, he found himself grateful for being injured. The next seven days would be his chance to

win her, and he would do all in his power to succeed.

Ten



Rebecca arrived at the ancient stone walls of Almerry Castle as the late afternoon sun washed over the countryside, casting an ethereal glow upon the aged façade. In her hands, she carried a small wicker basket filled with fresh linens and medicinal supplies, a new bandage nestled atop the bundles of herbs and tinctures.

With care, she made her way up the winding stone steps and through the towering oaken doors, the flickering light of candles guiding her path down the dimly lit corridors. Her soft footfalls echoed off the cold floors as she walked, taking in the Gothic arches and worn tapestries that lined the halls, remnants of ages long forgotten.

At last, she came to the solar where Camden rested, easing open the heavy door with care. Still as stone, Camden rested upon a worn settee, though Rebecca could see the slow rise and fall of his chest, catching the faintest hint of a snore carried in the musty air.

“Captain Beauchamp,” she called softly. Camden stirred then, blinking awake as if rising from a dream. He turned his head toward the sound of her voice, surprise flitting across his features for a moment before he came fully alert.

“Must we be so formal?” he rasped, voice gravelly from sleep. “I would rather like to hear my name on your lips.”

“Very well.” Rebecca smiled warmly, lifting the basket in her hands. “I’ve come to tend to your wound, Camden.”

His eyes dropped to the fresh bandages peeking from her basket, and he nodded. “Your kindness knows no bounds.”

“Rest easy,” Rebecca replied gently. “I will not cause you unnecessary discomfort.”

She moved to his side, laying out her supplies as she prepared to dress his injury once more. With delicate care, she unwound the old bandages, inspecting the healing gash upon the back of his hand, her touch soothing as a balm. Camden watched her silently, struck by the compassion in her eyes. The early sparks of love that had blossomed deep within him grew more profound.

Rebecca worked methodically yet gently as she cleaned the wound, her ministrations both practical and comforting. He studied her face, appreciating the furrow of concentration upon her brow, the purse of her lips as she focused on her task.

“Does it pain you still?” Rebecca asked, glancing up to meet his gaze.

Camden flexed his fingers slowly. “The ache has dulled, thanks to your excellent care. I’m in your debt, Rebecca.”

A pretty blush colored her cheeks at his words. She busied herself unwinding a fresh bandage, though a small smile played at her lips.

“I’m happy to be of service,” she replied. “For it is I who am in your debt.”

Camden nodded, touched by her selflessness. They sat in companionable silence for a moment as Rebecca wrapped the clean cloth around his palm. Her nearness was soothing, her touch kindling a warmth within him.

When she had finished, Rebecca met his eyes once more. “There. Good as new.”

“Good as new,” Camden echoed with a smile. He flexed his hand experimentally. “Thank you for your kindness.”

Rebecca’s gaze was tender. “Seeing you properly cared for is thanks enough. After what you did for my family... Well, I cannot very well allow your wound to turn putrid. You have earned my loyalty.”

Rebecca’s words hung in the air between them, both affected by the intimacy of the moment.

Camden cleared his throat, breaking the spell. “Forgive me, I shouldn’t keep you. I’m sure you have other things to attend to.”

“None so pressing as this,” Rebecca replied gently. She hesitated, then asked, “If I may...what led you to become a soldier?”

Camden tensed, old grief rising along with the fear of pushing her away. But Rebecca’s expression held only compassion. Perhaps she was ready to look past his profession. Slowly, haltingly, he spoke of why he purchased a commission and of the bloodshed he had witnessed, the friends lost, the horrors of war that haunted his dreams.

Rebecca sat beside him and listened in silence, her hand coming to rest lightly atop his uninjured one. The warmth of her touch kept Camden grounded as he unburdened his soul.

By the time his words trailed off, he felt strangely cleansed, as if lancing a wound to let it drain.

Rebecca gave his hand a gentle squeeze. “You have endured much,” she said softly. “But you are home now and the war is at an end. The past cannot hurt you here.”

Camden turned his hand beneath hers, lacing their fingers together. “You give me hope,” he admitted.

“Despite my obvious aversion to soldiers and all things military?” Rebecca’s lips curved. “I am quite certain I have been unfair to you.”

They smiled at one another, hands entwined, as the shadows retreated and light filled the room once more.

Rebecca let the moment linger, taking comfort in the connection between them. There would be time later to consider what it meant. For now, she was simply grateful to provide Camden with a measure of peace.

“I should go.” Reluctantly, she withdrew her hand. “Do accept my apologies for my early treatment of you. It is not you personally that I disliked. It is the soldier aspect. The war took my brother’s life. I have seen the lasting devastation wrought on Lady Daphne and my nephew—on my entire family.” She stood, then added, “I am certain you do not care to hear my reasons.”

“I’m interested in anything you wish to share,” Camden said sincerely. “I value the time we spend together and find myself longing to hear a story.”

Rebecca studied him for a long moment before nodding slowly. She retook her seat next to him. “Very well. I’ll tell you of my brother Roland, and the mischief Phoebe, Roland, and I got up to as children.”

Settling back in her chair, she began spinning tales of her childhood, bringing the memories vividly to life. Camden listened, enraptured by her voice and the sparkle in her eyes, as she recounted their adventures. For the first time since leaving the battlefield, he felt a lightness in his spirit that had nothing to do with physical healing.

Rebecca's eyes danced with amusement as she recalled one particular escapade.

"It was high summer, the air heavy with the scent of honeysuckle. Phoebe, Roland and I were restless, eager for adventure. We decided to explore the old gamekeeper's cottage deep in the woods."

She leaned forward conspiratorially. "It was rumored to be haunted, you see. By a ghostly white stag."

Camden raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "A white stag?"

"Oh yes. Some said it was the spirit of the old gamekeeper, forever guarding his domain." Rebecca's voice dropped to a dramatic whisper. "We simply had to investigate."

"Naturally," Camden replied, lips quirking.

"We crept through the trees, jumping at every snapped twig and rustle of leaves. The cottage loomed ahead, vines crawling up its crumbling walls. It was perfect."

Rebecca's eyes shone with remembered excitement. "Phoebe wanted to turn back, but I urged us on. Brave Roland pushed open the door..."

She trailed off intentionally, enjoying the suspense. Camden leaned toward her. "What happened next?"

Rebecca laughed. "Why, nothing! Just dust and cobwebs. No ghostly stag. No ghosts of any kind."

Camden chuckled, relaxing back against the settee. Her laughter was contagious, washing away his lingering darkness. With a pang, he realized how much he would miss her if he left.

Rebecca's laughter faded, and she glanced up, meeting his gaze. In his eyes she saw past and present intertwined—the shadowed soldier who fought in the war, and the man he was beyond the battlefield. A man who might be capable of leaving the darkness and foolishness of death and destruction behind. She cared about him—deeply. Her heart tugged, her throat growing tight at the realization.

Camden saw a battle raging in her eyes, a secret struggle she would not share with him. Heartache, surprise, tenderness. He saw it all in the green depths of her gaze.

The moment stretched between them, fragile as a moth's wing. In those quiet moments, he had his own realization. Here was something worth fighting for. Worth protecting.

The candlelight flickered, dancing across their features. Rebecca's cheeks were tinged pink. Slowly, reluctantly, she withdrew her hand. The loss of her touch left an ache.

“I should take my leave,” she murmured. Her voice was gentle, almost wistful. She busied herself gathering up her basket.

Camden longed to call her back, but held his tongue. There would be time ahead to explore what lay between them. For now, it was enough to watch her go, her footsteps echoing down the ancient stone corridors.

When she had disappeared from view, Camden let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He flexed his

bandaged hand, imprinting the memory of her touch. Tomorrow they would meet again.

Rebecca's footsteps slowed as she made her way down the winding staircase, each step taking her further from Camden. She chided herself for lingering so long in his presence, for allowing herself to get drawn in by the intensity of his gaze.

And yet... she could not deny the connection that had sparked between them from the very beginning. It both thrilled and frightened her in equal measure.

Pausing on the landing, Rebecca glanced back over her shoulder, half hoping to see Camden there. But the corridor behind her remained empty.

She sighed, adjusting the basket on her arm. Best to return home and put the encounter from her mind. She could never find happiness as a soldier's wife.

Even as she told herself this, Rebecca knew she would count the hours until she had cause to return to Almerry Castle. To see him again.

The ancient oak door creaked open before her. Beyond lay the sweeping lawn of the bailey, bathed now in the fading golden light of dusk.

Rebecca stepped out into the fresh air, breathing deep the scent of roses on the breeze. Somewhere nearby a skylark burst into joyful song, its trilling melody reminding her that life held brightness still, even amidst the aftermath of war and grief. Then, with a lighter heart, Rebecca made her way home.

Eleven



Camden watched Rebecca intently as she gently unwound the bandage from his injured hand. Just as it was in the previous three days, her touch was soft and soothing, her fingers deftly working to avoid causing him any pain. Though he knew he was more than capable, Camden was glad it was Rebecca tending to him.

“It seems to be healing well,” Rebecca said, inspecting the nearly closed gash on his palm.

He nodded as she wrapped a fresh linen strip around his palm. He liked the way she fussed over him, but mostly he enjoyed spending time alone with her. During her visits, he’d told her about his brother and parents, his childhood. In return, she’d told him more about her childhood and her family.

He still attended the house party, but enjoyed the time they spent at Almerry most of all. Aside from her chaperone, they were alone in the castle. At her estate, there seemed to always be several people about, making it difficult for them to be their authentic selves.

“Soon you will have no need of bandages,” she said.

He glanced up, his gaze fixating on her plump pink lips. How he longed to possess them. He swallowed hard, then said, “All thanks to your tender care.”

Her cheeks tinted.

The sight of her blushing so prettily caused a surge of desire to course through him. He'd not kissed her since that day in the storage room. Not that the opportunity had not presented itself, but he wished to form a true bond with her. One that centered around more than passion. He wanted to be her friend, her confidant, her safe place. Bloody hell, he wanted to be her...everything.

The curiosity and desire he experienced in their earlier interactions had changed into something more, something stronger. Rebecca had captured his heart, but did he hold hers as well?

"You should eat," she said as she placed a plate of biscuits and jam in front of him. "We missed you at luncheon. Everyone asked after you. Even Daphne made an appearance at the table."

"How does Lady Daphne fare?" Camden reached for a biscuit, then took a bite, relishing the sweet taste of blackberry jam. He chewed slowly, giving Rebecca time to answer his question.

"She makes no complaints, but it is plain to see her leg pains her. Every time she shifts her weight, her face contorts." Rebecca placed a cup of tea on the makeshift table in front of him. "Mother still tries to get Daphne to take the laudanum left by the surgeon, but she refuses. Says she'd rather feel a little discomfort than have her mind foggy."

He nodded in understanding as he swallowed down the last bite of his biscuit. Camden could sympathize with Lady Daphne's reluctance to take the drug. He had seen far too many lives ruined by laudanum. Fellow soldiers who became addicted to laudanum after being injured in battle. Many

turned to opium, losing their lives in an entirely different way. Not that he thought Lady Daphne would suffer such an outcome. Still, he commanded her strength of will and refusal.

“I do not fault her for thinking in such a way. Laudanum is powerful stuff. I would refuse the drug as well,” he said.

Rebecca poured him a cup of tea and handed it to him, her fingers brushing against his as she did so. “That may be true, but I think her foolish for suffering when she need not.” Rebecca strolled across the entry hall to the trunk. “I wish there were something I could do to lessen her burden. I spend time with her each day, read to her and tell her stories about Almerry’s legend. Mother, Phoebe, and I take turns keeping her company.”

Camden rose and moved to her side. “I am certain she appreciates your efforts, as do I.”

She crouched down, tracing the trunk’s carved scroll with her fingertips. “I do not tend your wound for appreciation, but thank you all the same.”

Camden studied the trunk, his eyes narrowed as he wondered at the contents. He still wished to know what secrets it held. “Do you ever intend to inspect the contents?”

She glanced up at him through thick lashes, her lower lip caught between her teeth. “I have considered it.”

“You could do so today.” He crouched next to her. “We could do it together.”

She grinned, mischief lighting her green eyes. “The suspense is too much for you, isn’t it?” Her smile grew, lighting her eyes. “You are like a lad at Christmas, so impatient that you can not sleep.” She met his gaze and pursed her lips. “You’ve probably already looked.”

Camden shook his head, amusement dancing in his eyes. “I most certainly have not.” He crossed his arms over his broad chest. “But I may soon if you do not end the suspense.”

Rebecca laughed again and looked at him playfully. She reached out to lift the lid of the trunk a few inches, then lowered it back into place with a dramatic flourish. Her laughter filled the room.

He couldn’t help but laugh as well at her antics, admiring her mischief and wit more than ever. His body yearned for her, heat pulsing through him like an electric current every time she touched him or met his gaze with her own mischievous one. Camden cleared his throat and tried to focus on the task at hand, lest he give in to temptation and kiss her sweet lips right then and there.

“You, my lady, are a terrible tease,” he said, chuckling as he placed his hand on top of hers. “Shall we open it together?”

She sobered, her gaze searching his. “If you truly wish to know, I will empty it for you.”

“I only jest. The trunk belongs to you. I care not when or even if you remove its contents.” He rubbed his thumb in lazy circles over her hand before reluctantly releasing it and stepping away from her.

Even through her glove, she could feel the warmth radiating from his touch, sending waves of heat up and down her arm. She shivered slightly at the sensation before turning away from him and toward the trunk once more.

“Very well then,” she said with a deep breath, hoping it would steady her racing heart as much as calm her racing mind. “It shall remain a mystery, leastwise for now.”

He searched Rebecca's beautiful face. "You had better get home and ready yourself for the ball. I shall be devastated if you miss our dance." He stood, offering his arm to her. "Allow me to show you out."

"Oh, how you tease." She rested her fingertips on his coat sleeve.

He smiled. His words were meant to tease, but they held the truth as well. Tonight would be a special night for them, and he had no wish for his plans to be delayed.

He led her to the large arched door and placed a kiss on the back of her hand. "Until tonight, my lady." He winked.

Twelve



Rebecca stood with Phoebe near a potted fern at the back of the ballroom. Most of the guests had already spilled into the space. Ladies and gentlemen stood in every corner, fanning out along the walls of the candlelit room as they waited for Mother and Father to open the floor for dancing.

Still, Camden had not appeared. Her stomach tightened as she stared at the entrance. What could be keeping him? He had seemed eager this afternoon, and gave every indication that he would not miss their dance.

“Is something bothering you?” Phoebe asked, worry lines etched her brow.

“No.” Rebecca glanced at Phoebe, then quickly back to the door. Camden would arrive any minute, and she did not want to miss his entrance. Everything was fine. She was sure of it.

“Are you quite certain? You acted a bit strange all afternoon, and now you seem very distracted,” Phoebe said as she rested her hand on Rebecca’s arm.

“I am merely anxious to see this house party draw to an end.” Rebecca flipped open her fan. Had the air warmed suddenly? She fanned herself as she said, “The past fortnight has been grueling. I long for everyone to take their leave.”

“Will you be saddened by Captain Beauchamp’s departure?”

Rebecca’s chest tightened, and she had the sudden realization that she no longer wished for him to leave. She sighed, her gaze still on the door. “I do not know that he plans to leave. He has said nothing of the sort to me.”

“But surely you know he must wish to. He cannot stay in that decrepit castle forever.”

“Almerry is not decrepit. He has been working to restore it and plans to return it to its former splendor.”

Camden swept into the room and Rebecca swallowed hard, a lump forming in her throat. She’d enjoyed their time together so much she’d allowed herself to ignore that he was a soldier.

There was no ignoring the fact now.

He wore his full dress uniform, and though he looked breathtakingly handsome in the white breeches and red coat decorated with intricate gold designs, it reminded her how ill suited they were. Nonetheless, she felt pulled toward him.

She glanced at Phoebe. “If you will excuse me, I promised Captain Beauchamp the first set.”

“By all means.” Phoebe grinned, opening her fan with a flip of her wrist. “Do not keep him waiting.”

Rebecca pushed away her trepidation and made her way toward Camden. She would enjoy this night, even if tomorrow promised heartache. Tomorrow she would end their courtship. She wished things were different, but she could no more change the fact that he was a soldier than she could bring Roland back from the grave. It mattered not that she’d come to care for Camden—to love him—they could never make a match.

She'd been a fool for taking Phoebe's advice when she had known from the start there was no future for her and Camden. It was a dangerous game and she never should have indulged it. But did she ever have a choice? Camden attended the house party and currently resided next-door. It was not as if she could have hid from him.

She would not—could not—think on it tonight.

As the quartet struck the first cords of a country-dance, she met Camden's eyes and gave a brilliant smile.

"My lady." Camden bowed before he offered his arm. "I believe this is our dance."

Rebecca curtsied. "Captain Beauchamp, I believe you are right." She rested her fingers on his sleeve before glancing at the dance floor to where her parents stood. "I also believe you are late." She ignored the familiar flutter of her stomach at his touch.

"Nonsense, I am right on time." He swept her onto the dance floor, where they took their positions in line.

The music started, and she curtsied while he bowed. He caught her gaze as they swept past each other and offered a wink. Heat scorched her cheeks. She glanced around as she made her turn. Heaven forbid anyone noticed his flirtatious actions. When she swept past him, the second time, she gave him a scowl. "Behave yourself."

He grinned at her from across the floor. Blast her body for it warmed at the sight. And her fool heart—the blasted thing soared. She averted her gaze to her mother and father. They danced by, light on their feet and grinning at each other. Once they had passed, Rebecca and Camden came together. She

placed her hands in his with a furtive glance. He led her down the line, mischief dancing in his eyes.

Camden led her through the rest of the dance in silence. Rebecca's heart thumped as she took Camden's arm, allowing him to guide her from the floor.

"That was exhilarating. Will you join me for a stroll out of doors?" He led her toward the large doors at the rear of the ballroom. "It is stifling in here."

"What about our second dance? We will miss it," she protested.

"I would prefer to have you alone." He brought his hand to rest over hers, giving a gentle squeeze.

Her cheeks blazed at the public show of affection. "What if someone notices our absence?"

"I have taken care to ensure your reputation remains intact. A chaperone awaits us." He nodded at the elderly lady stationed by the doors.

She sighed, wishing she could argue further. However, the lady was a widow and would make a perfectly suitable chaperone. "Very well. Some fresh air sounds appealing," Rebecca conceded. She took some comfort in the fact there would be a breeze to cool her burning skin.

He led her across the threshold and out into the open night air. She glanced over her shoulder to ensure the elderly lady followed. "Will you be departing for London on the morrow?"

"I wish to speak to you about that very matter." He turned her toward a path where torches cast their warm glow on the hedgerow.

The implications made her throat tighten. She did not want him to leave, but things would be easier if he did. The sooner he left, the sooner their hearts could heal. Tears welled in her eyes. She blinked against them, refusing to show weakness.

He brought them to a stop near a torch and turned to her. His eyes shone in the firelight as he took her hand in his. “Lady Rebecca, I have grown very fond of you during our brief acquaintance, and I believe you feel the same for me.”

The tenderness in his gaze coupled with his actions alarmed her. She pulled her hand back, but he held tight.

“Dare I say love has blossomed between us?” he stroked his thumb over her hand as he spoke.

She wanted to shake her head, deny his words. Her heart demanded she confess her love, while her mind screamed at her to deny loving him. She opened her mouth to speak, but her tongue refused to cooperate.

“For my part, I have no doubts. Somewhere along the way you took my heart captive.” He lowered to one knee. “You are the woman I love. The woman I wish to grow old with. To laugh with. To raise a family with. Marry me, Lady Rebecca Summerville, and I vow to love you always.”

An agonizing tightness clenched her chest. Her eyes stung as the cruel truth slammed into her. She did love him. More than she ever thought a woman could love a man. But was love enough? It had not done Daphne any favors. Rebecca could not put herself in the same position, no matter how much she loved Camden.

Her heart may never recover, but at least she could spare herself further heartache by ending this now. She could ensure

her life did not turn out like Daphne's, and mayhap in time she would love another. God willing, Camden would as well.

“Rebecca, I am asking for your hand.” The warmth in his eyes nearly felled her. “Have you nothing to say?”

She averted her gaze, swallowed past the lump in her throat. Her chaperone stood back at the entry to the path, speaking with another guest. “I...I cannot marry you.” She drew in a breath and said, “I am sorry, Captain Beauchamp. I cannot.”

“I understand your fears.” He rose to his feet, pulling her against him, locking his arms around her. “But you are not a coward, Rebecca. We can face them together.”

For a moment, she melted into his embrace before stiffening and pulling away. “I shall not, can not, become a soldier's wife. It leads to too much heartbreak.” One lone tear slipped from the corner of her eye and glided hotly down her cheek. Her heart shattered as she forced herself to say the words, “I do not love you.”

The dark flash in his eyes was her only warning. He bent his head, slanted his lips across hers. She kissed him back freely, giving fully of herself. One last kiss she would hold deep in her heart for the rest of her days.

When he pulled back, she dragged her gaze to his. “Good bye, Captain Beauchamp.” She twisted in his grip and he released his hold on her. With haste, she set off down the path.

“Your kiss betrays you, Rebecca,” he called after her. “You are lying to me, and perhaps even to yourself.”

His words arrowed through her, and she froze in place. She needed to make him hate her so he would take his leave without further issue. So he would move on and find love with

a more suitable lady. With a ragged breath, she stiffened her spine, squaring her shoulders. “My kiss contained nothing more than lust. I assure you, I could never love you.”

He peered at her, his face burning. “You would rather call yourself a harlot than admit to your feelings for me?”

“I have no feelings for you. I have kissed many a gentleman with the same passion as I have kissed you.” She gathered her skirt in both hands and ran.

Thirteen



Rebecca threw herself onto the bed and buried her face in the pillow. Her shoulders trembled as she allowed her tears to break free. Never had she felt so dreadful. She'd hurt a good man merely because she could not stomach his profession. It was horrible of her and she knew it, but to marry him would only lead to further harm. She could never support his career. Never understand his desire to be a soldier. She would live in fear of the day he got called to fight and he would grow to hate her.

She made the only decision she could, so why did it devastate her so? She rolled onto her side, facing the window, and pulled her knees close to her abdomen. She had to love him enough to let him go. Still, she feared she would always wonder and worry about him.

What was he doing now? Was he still angry? Or had anger given way to sorrow? Had Camden returned to Almerry or chosen to brave the remainder of the ball? Nausea swept through her as she replayed their conversation in her mind. His devastated look out in the garden stole her breath, sending a stab of pain straight through her heart.

Startled, Rebecca jumped as someone touched her shoulder. Rolling over, she found Daphne propped up on a

crutch, staring down at her. She wiped the tears from her face and scrambled to sit upright. “You should be resting.”

“And you should be dancing.” Daphne stared at Rebecca, her gaze sympathetic and worried. “Scoot over and let me in.”

Rebecca slid across the bed, making room for Daphne to settle in beside her.

Once situated, Daphne cast a warm smile at her. “Now tell me, what troubles you?”

“Captain Beauchamp proposed to me.” She pulled a handful of her coverlet close to her cheek.

Daphne grinned. “That should be wonderful news. Why are you up here crying instead of downstairs celebrating?”

“I turned him away.” Rebecca sniffled and dashed a fresh tear from her cheek.

Daphne’s brow furrowed. “Whatever for? Captain Beauchamp is a fine catch. A war hero and a gentleman.”

“I cannot marry a soldier. I am sorry, Daphne, but I have no desire to become a young widow.” A fresh batch of sobs racked Rebecca’s body. “Look how you wound up. Alone with a baby.”

“Hush now.” Daphne pulled Rebecca close. “I would become a young widow over and over again if it meant a life with the man I loved. And I am not alone. I have my son and you and Phoebe and your parents.”

“How can you say such a thing? Roland has been gone for nearly two years and you still cry yourself to sleep most nights.” Rebecca glanced up, ignoring the tears streaming down her cheeks. “I can hear you through the wall.”

“I will not deny my sorrow.” Daphne took Rebecca’s hand in hers. “However, I do not grieve over Roland’s death; I grieve over the loss of his presence.”

Rebecca looked up at Daphne, confused. “You speak in riddles.”

“I merely mean I grieved him in life as well. Anytime we were separated, my heart ached for him because I loved him.” Daphne squeezed Rebecca’s hand. “I still do. You cannot run from love. The only cure for your suffering is Captain Beauchamp.”

Rebecca closed her eyes, her mind spinning.

“I would choose Roland time and again if given the opportunity, despite knowing how things ended for us. A thousand deaths would not sway me, for the time we had together was full of love and happiness. I would never give up a moment I spent with him. Not for any reason.”

Rebecca groaned and pulled the coverlet over her face. Daphne’s words filled her head. Half of her wanted to cling to a life free of heartbreak, while the other longed for the life Daphne’s words implied—a life with Captain Camden Beauchamp.

Should she go to Camden? Tell him what a fool she’d been, or stay the course and hope the pain would pass? “Daphne, I don’t know what to do,” Rebecca sobbed.

Daphne tugged the coverlet back down, pinning Rebecca with her gaze. “Let me ask you this. Is it possible for you to hurt more than you do right now?”

“Yes... No... I...” Rebecca shook her head. “My heart is broken.”

Daphne's voice was quiet, but her words held weight. "Then what do you have to lose?" she asked.

Rebecca considered Daphne's words for a long moment. Seeing the reason in them, she said, "Nothing." She dried her tears, then moved from the bed to stand at the window. "I have nothing to lose. Thank you for making me understand, Daphne. For helping me see reason."

Rebecca's gaze shifted to the flickering light coming from the castle's lancet window. The castle where Camden had first kissed her. Where he had given her the most wonderful gift she had ever received. The place where they had first met and where they had come to know each other. Where they had fallen in love. Her heart swelled until her emotions were nearly too big to contain. She spun to her sister-in-law and said, "I must go to him."

Daphne beamed at her, a joyous smile stretching across her face. "Good. Now go make things right for both of you. I will stay here in case anyone should come looking."

Rebecca dashed across the chamber, coming to a halt at her bedroom door. "Thank you, Daphne."

"Off with you," Daphne said as she waved her out. "Go before you get found out."

Rebecca raced from the room and toward Almerry. As she ran, she prayed Camden would forgive her. Prayed he would welcome her with open arms.

What a fool she'd been.

Everything seemed pointedly clear to Rebecca as she rode at a full gallop toward the looming gatehouse of Almerry. Her heart raced, keeping beat with the horse's thundering hooves.

She'd not blame him if he hated her; it would be her own fault. Still, she prayed he would welcome her back into his life.

She pulled her mount's reins next to the stairs leading to the second-story entry and slid from her saddle. Her fingers fumbled, slipping from the leather reins as she tried to tie them to a nearby post. After long moments of frustration, she managed the semblance of a knot. She took the steps two at a time, her skirts hiked up to her knees before pounding on the massive arched door, her heartbeat keeping time with the pounding of her fists.

When no answer came, she pushed the heavy door open. With her heart in her throat, she raced across the entry hall. "Camden! Camden!" She yelled as she made her way up to the third floor. Her chest heaved with the exertion. She paused for a moment, gasping for breath.

"Camden, where are you?" She called out, her voice echoing through the keep. Slivers of moonlight spilled through the lancet windows, lighting her path as she stepped into the master chamber. A makeshift bed sat along the far wall, but Camden did not lie upon it. She glanced around the room. There were no signs anyone occupied the room. She made her way to the next chamber, and her heart plummeted. Empty. Had he left Almerry? "Camden, I was wrong. I'm sorry." Her voice bounced off the walls, echoing back to her.

She ran from room to room, floor to floor. There was no sign Camden had stayed here. Not a stitch of clothing or scrap of parchment anywhere to be found. Not even a servant answered her pleas. Finally, out of breath and back in the entrance hall, she sank onto the floor, clutching her knees. A fresh batch of tears pricked at her eyes as she rocked back and forth. She was too late. Blast her foolishness. He'd taken his

possessions and gone. Now she would never get the chance to tell him how she really felt. Never feel his arms around her again. Her heart shattered anew as tears spilled from her eyes.

The cool floor chilled her bones, but she did not care to move. Instead, she pressed her eyes shut against the pain she'd caused. How had she allowed herself to be so foolish? She rolled onto her back, stared up at the ancient ceiling. Her chest rose and fell at a rapid pace as she fought to gain control of her emotions.

She pushed herself up from the floor, straightened her gown, and dusted her skirts off. He could not have gotten far in so short a time. She'd go after him. Surely he rode for London. How hard could he be to find? She drew in a deep breath against the pounding of her heart. She had to tell him how wrong she was.

Fourteen



Camden pushed his horse hard to escape Almerry and its memories of Rebecca. The clop-clop-clop of hooves and Camden's heavy breathing intermingled with the sound of the wind, the rustling trees, and the occasional howl of a night animal.

The cloying bile of regret, and the startling clarity of pain, were his companions. He rode hard, desperate to put more distance between them. He glanced up at the night sky rushing past in streaks of starlight.

His heart squeezed. What was Rebecca doing now? Did her heart bleed as his did? Her words had stung like a well-placed slap, burning a trail through him that incinerated his heart.

He knew she did not mean them, but the knowledge did nothing to lessen their impact. Rebecca might just as well have pierced his heart with a dagger. But why?

The answer slammed into him. She was afraid and lashed out to protect herself. He drew in a deep breath and slowed his mount, her words replaying through his mind. "I shall not become a soldier's wife." He blinked against the memory. "My brother Roland was killed in battle." His pulse sped.

How had he failed to see it before? She was afraid of losing him to war—afraid of becoming a widow like Daphne, left behind to raise a child on her own. What could he say to change her mind? Was it even possible to make her see past her fears? He tapped his fingers against his thigh, contemplating.

He'd served bravely and the British Army had licked Napoleon. There was no longer any danger of battle. Certainly Rebecca knew the war had come to an end, and yet she still feared being wed to him, to a soldier. He had to turn back. Camden could not give up on her or their love. He had to change her mind. Soothe her fears.

His pulse sped as he tugged the reins, the horse jerking beneath him to change direction. With a firm hand, he pushed the stallion into a gallop. He would not give up on Rebecca and the future he dreamed of.

Camden rode back through the night, a strange mixture of dread and hope lacing his veins. He prayed that in the morning light Rebecca would have changed her mind, but knew it was wishful thinking. Her fear was too deeply rooted in the loss of her brother.

Still, he could not picture the rest of his life without her beside him. He had to fight for her and he would. She had done her best to put up a strong front back at the ball, but he'd seen the truth in the depths of her eyes. Her words had laid waste to her heart, just as they'd done to his. Rebecca loved him, and that was worth everything.

Captain Camden Beauchamp did not shy away from a challenge. Resolve stiffened his spine. He had never in his life run away from battle and he'd not start now. He snapped the reins, pushing his horse faster.

Nearly halfway back to the castle, he caught sight of another rider. He peered into the distance as the rider guided their mount off the side of the road. Instinct took over as he retrieved his pistol from the saddle holster. He neared the spot where the rider had disappeared with caution, his gaze trained on the roadside. With a steady hand, he stopped his mount, aiming his pistol into the blackness of night. "Show yourself or I'll shoot."

For a long moment, nothing happened. Then a figure emerged from the shadows. A prickle of recognition raced through him before she came fully into view. He jumped from his saddle, pistol still in hand. "Are you mad? Do you not know the dangers of traveling at night? Alone?" He tucked the gun into his coat and reached for Rebecca, running his hands across her shoulders, down her arms. "Are you hurt?"

"No. I came to tell you how sorry I am for the things I said."

He narrowed his gaze at her, not entirely sure what she was about. Afraid to hope, determined to have her.

She placed her hands on his cheeks and stared into his eyes. "I came to tell you I love you."

His heart hammered in his chest, and tears welled in her eyes. He knew the truth of it before she spoke the words. Even so, hearing them meant more than he ever could have imagined.

He moved forward, taking her in his arms, burying his face in her hair, breathing in the scent of jasmine and rose that clung to her. He felt her body shaking against him as he pulled away and their gazes locked once more.

But then a thought occurred to him, and he stepped back, breaking free from her embrace. “But you cannot marry me because I am a soldier.” He studied her gaze as he spoke, watching for any reluctance or fear in her expression as she responded.

“What if I were no longer in the army?” he asked.

The moment hung between them like a bridge to something new, and Rebecca’s lips curved into a small smile that warmed Camden’s heart through the chill of the night air.

She reached for him again. “Did you hear me? I said I love you.” Rebecca rested her hands on either side of his face while standing on tiptoes to meet him eye-to-eye with determination written across every inch of her delicate features. “I do not care about your profession; I love you, Captain Camden Beauchamp, and I want to spend my life with you.”

His heart soared as he stared deep into her eyes, searching her soul. “Say it again,” he urged, desperate to hear her repeat the words.

“I want to be your wife,” she said as she looked up, peeking at him through thick lashes. “If you will still have me.”

Camden looked down at Rebecca, his heart beating fast with joy. He smiled and brushed a stray lock of hair from her forehead. “I want to be your husband,” he whispered, his voice low and gruff with emotion.

Rebecca shifted in his arms and met his gaze with a shy smile. “Then you will still have me?”

“I will always choose you,” he said, sweeping her into his arms and spinning her in a circle, before sitting her feet back on the ground. “Yes, I will have you,” he declared, laughing as

he said it. “I will sell my commission, and once it is done, we will wed.” He grinned down at her as he stroked her back in slow circles, as if trying to soothe away any hesitation in her mind. “I want to make you happy for the rest of your days.” He pulled her close again, his arms around her waist as they swayed together beneath the star-filled night sky.

“I wish to make you happy and if being a soldier makes you happy, then I will support you in it.” She tucked herself against him, rested her head on his muscled chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat as she let out a contented sigh.

“Being your husband and master of Almerry will make me happy. Let’s go home,” Camden said softly into the darkness, “and start making plans for our future together.”

Rebecca hugged him close and said, “Camden.”

“Yes,” he replied, hugging her back.

“I was silly being so afraid. Foolish to let you go. I love you, and being a soldier is part of who you are. It’s your heritage. I would not change you.”

His chest swelled at her declaration. He lowered his head, capturing her soft lips. She wound her arms around him, pulling him close as she tilted her head, welcoming his kiss. Passion ignited between them, fierce and unyielding. The kiss deepened, becoming a fiery conflagration that consumed them both.

Camden pulled back, his dark eyes ablaze with emotion. He stroked her hair and whispered, “I promise to always cherish you. To always protect you and keep you safe. To love you until my dying breath.”

Rebecca looked up at him with her green eyes shining with love and trust. “I believe you, and make you the same promises,” she said, her voice breaking with emotion.

Camden cupped her face in his hands and kissed her forehead. “Let’s go home and start our life together,” he said, and with that, they mounted their horses and rode back to the castle. A new chapter in their lives had just begun, and they were ready to face it together.

Chapter 15



Three weeks later...

Rebecca's heart beat with joy as she and Camden watched the last of their wedding guests walk through the ancient gatehouse. They clung to each other, her palm flat against his chest. The chill midmorning breeze ruffled Rebecca's skirts, but its coldness was lost on her as she stood in the bailey of Almerry Castle, surrounded by lush, fragrant gardens teeming with vibrant pink and yellow blooms. Her parents, sister, and Daphne, along with Camden's parents and brother, waved their farewells, smiling approvingly as the newly married couple basked in the sheer delight of being together. Behind them, the keep rose up to guard them like a sentinel for all eternity.

She gazed up into Camden's eyes after the last of the carriages disappeared from sight. "I have a gift for you, husband." Her heart fluttered with anticipation and she gave him a glowing smile.

"You have already given me the best gift imaginable." He dropped a kiss on her forehead, then swept her into his arms, cradling her body close to his.

She laid her head against his chest as he carried her up the stairs, past their borrowed butler, and into Almerry's entry hall. She knew that tomorrow he would take her away on an adventure for their honeymoon, but tonight they were here within the castle walls, and she meant to enjoy every moment. Overcome with joy, she closed her eyes and let out a gentle sigh. Opening them, she met his gaze and said, "I would like very much to see what is concealed within the old trunk."

He stopped walking and gave her his full attention. "Are you certain?" he asked.

"Yes. And once we know what it holds, I wish for you to make love to me." Her cheeks burned at the admission.

"I cannot imagine what I did to deserve such a perfect woman as my wife." He brought his lips to hers, kissing her soundly before lowering her to her feet. "But for the rest of my days, I shall strive to deserve you."

"And I you." She stood on her toes, pressing her lips against his in a gentle kiss. "Now let us see what treasures the trunk holds."

He knelt beside her and together they lifted the lid. She met his eyes before reaching in to run her slender fingers slowly over the soft red fabric. Biting her bottom lip, she carefully pulled it from the ancient oak trunk and held it up for a better look. "It's a gown," she whispered in awe as she spread it out on the ground between them.

"A medieval kirtle." He said, studying her movements with a mischievous twinkle in his blue eyes. "And chain mail." He lifted out the heavy garments of iron links.

"Do you suppose they belonged to Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel?" She whispered, her voice filled with wonder.

“It is possible. They appear old enough to have belonged to them.” He fiddled with the chain mail, inspecting the iron links.

Rebecca’s eyes lit up as she lifted a man’s tunic and hose out of the trunk. The fabric was soft, a deep blue with intricate gold embroidery adorning the edges. She raised it to her face, letting its scent linger in her nose before carefully laying it down on the floor. “I would like to think they do,” she smiled, “that your ancestors left behind more than just their great love story and legacy of battle.”

“Ah, my darling, that is where you are wrong.”

She turned to him, one brow arched in question. “Wrong how?” she asked.

“It is a legacy of love they left behind. For it was love that conquered their hearts, bringing them together despite the battle they waged between them.”

“Love’s legacy.” She turned his words over in her mind. One corner of her mouth lifted in a half smile as she met his gaze. “A promise of everlasting passion. I like the sound of that.” She leaned forward, peering into the trunk. A metal box remained inside, tucked into a corner of the large chest. Her pulse quickened. There was something inscribed on the top, but she couldn’t interpret what it said beneath the centuries of tarnish. She lifted it out and presented it to Camden. “Look, something is engraved on the top.”

He leaned closer, his fingertips barely brushing the engraved top. “Let me see it.” He looked up expectantly, and she handed it to him, the weight of it heavy in his palm. He rubbed his shirtsleeve across the inscription before tilting the box toward the candlelight. He squinted at the words etched into the tarnished silver. “It’s Latin, *Amor Vincit Omnia.*”

“Love conquers all.” She beamed at him, her eyes twinkling and a giddy excitement emanating from her.

He inclined his head, extending the box out to her. “Open it,” he said, his voice soft.

Her finger shook as she lifted the top to peer inside. A necklace rested on a bed of royal-blue fabric. A miniature painting of a couple hung from the chain. Her breath hitched as she stared at the raven-haired woman and blond-haired man, the carved stone hearth of the great hall behind them.

Camden sidled up next to her, his chin just above her shoulder as he studied the piece. He found it hard to pull his gaze away from the bauble. “It is them, Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel.”

Tears welled in her eyes as emotion overwhelmed her. “This is amazing.” She whispered, replacing the lid with care before putting the box back into the chest. “It is like they meant for us to have it.”

Camden placed his hand on the side of her face and gently rubbed his thumb back and forth across her cheekbone. She closed her eyes and sighed contentedly at his touch.

He pulled away and looked into her eyes, his own full of love and adoration. “It pales in comparison to you, my wife,” he said softly as he pulled her into an embrace.

She smiled against his shoulder, melting into him as she wrapped her arms around him and kissed his neck lightly. His familiar smell made her heart skip a beat. This was where she belonged.

He pulled away just enough that he could look into her eyes again and searched them for assurance that she felt the same way about him as he did for her. Satisfied by what he

saw there, he smiled down at her tenderly before whispering three words that filled both of them with an infinite amount of hope and joy, “I love you.”

“I love you too.” She clung to his shoulders, her heart pounding in anticipation as he scooped her up into the strength of his embrace.

Her heart raced as he carried her up a winding staircase to the second floor. At the top of the stairs, Camden paused before an oak door. “This was their home.” He turned to her, eyes glowing with devotion. “And now, my darling, it shall be ours.”

Rebecca held him tighter. “Our love will honor the legend they left for Almerry.”

He carried her over the threshold, the door creaking closed behind them. Tonight, in this hallowed place, they would craft their own memories of love eternal, joining hearts as Isabel and Ariston had so long ago.

Camden set her gently on her feet, his hands lingering at her waist. The firelight danced across his features, shadows caressing the sharp planes of his face. His eyes were soft with tenderness as he gazed down at her. “Rebecca, my love.” His voice was a reverent whisper. “When I’m with you, I feel as though I’ve come home at long last. You are my heart, my breath, my everything.”

Tears stung her eyes at his heartfelt confession.

Camden cupped her cheek, his touch filled with longing. “Say you feel the same. Tell me I’m not alone in this love that threatens to consume me.”

She placed her hand over his, pressing into his caress. “You could never be alone in this, for I love you too, with

everything I am.”

A ragged sigh escaped him as he gathered her close. “You cannot know how happy hearing those words from your lips makes me,” he murmured, his hand sliding into her hair. “How I have ached for you, my darling.”

“As I have ached for you, my husband,” she whispered.

The fire crackled, bathing them in its warm glow as they came together. Rebecca sighed into his mouth, her hands tangling in his hair to draw him closer still. His arms encircled her, holding her fast against him as they explored the sweetness of each other’s lips.

A spark ignited within her, spreading through her like liquid fire. She wanted nothing more than to lose herself in his embrace, to give herself over to the passion that threatened to consume them both.

Rebecca trembled as Camden’s hands trailed down her back, his touch both reverent and possessive. His fingers skimmed along the edge of her bodice, slipping underneath to caress her bare skin. She gasped at the intimacy, her heart racing as he slowly undid the laces of her gown.

The garment whispered to the floor, leaving her clad only in her shift. Camden’s eyes smoldered as he gazed upon her, as if he could see straight through to her soul. “So beautiful,” he breathed, brushing his knuckles down the curve of her neck.

Rebecca flushed under the intensity of his stare, aching for the feel of his hands on her once more. He granted her unspoken wish, sliding the thin straps of her shift off her shoulders until the only thing left clinging to her body was his heated gaze.

She moved to undo the buttons of his waistcoat, her fingers trembling with excitement and clumsy with inexperience.

He stilled her hands, bringing them to his lips for a kiss. “Patience, my love.” His voice was husky with restrained desire. “We have all the time in the world.” He removed his coat and waistcoat with agonizing slowness, tantalizing her with each inch of skin he revealed. Rebecca bit her lip to stifle a moan, her body thrumming with a need she did not quite understand.

At last, he stood before her in all his masculine glory, sculpted muscle and tanned skin that glowed in the firelight. She dared to reach out and trace the lines of his chest and abdomen, delighting in the feel of him under her fingertips.

He eased her down onto the soft rug, arranging her hair like a halo around her head. “So beautiful,” he whispered, awe etched into his handsome features.

Rebecca’s heart swelled under the devotion in his gaze. She reached up to cup his cheek, thrilling at the rasp of stubble against her palm. “I love you, Camden Beauchamp. Now and forever.”

Camden smiled as he turned his head to press a kiss into Rebecca’s palm. “As I love you, Rebecca Beauchamp, now and always.”

He moved lower, trailing kisses along her collarbone and down to her breasts. His tongue flicked out to tease the tight buds of her nipples before moving ever downward.

Rebecca gasped as Camden settled himself between her legs, stroking his fingers through the curls at the apex of her thighs before sinking one finger into her wet passage.

He teased and caressed until she was panting with need, his hands and mouth leading her to pleasures she could never have imagined. Allowing instinct to guide her, she moved against him, delighting in the new sensations he caused.

She ran her hands over his back and shoulders, feeling the muscles that moved and corded beneath his skin. The hard planes brushed against her palms as he continued to stoke the fire within her. Her desire for him became almost unbearable, and she cried out, "Please," thrusting her hips against him, searching for relief.

He lowered himself over her, bracing his weight on his forearms. She welcomed him into her embrace, glorying in the feel of his heated skin against hers. Their kisses deepened, tongues dancing in a rhythm as old as time. Rebecca slid her hands over his back, clutching him close as desire coiled tight within her.

He shifted, one thigh sliding between hers in a slow, deliberate move. He thrust slowly into her. She gasped at the shock of pain, then pleasure, rocking her hips to test the feel and fullness of him within her.

Camden began to move in a rhythm that quickly had her moaning beneath him as the pleasure built to a new high within her. His lips found hers again as their bodies moved in unison, heat and passion coiling around them.

Camden growled low in his throat, his control fraying around the edges. Rebecca smiled against his mouth, reveling in her power over this magnificent man who had captured her heart.

Each caress brought them closer to the pinnacle, their bodies moving as if they shared one soul. Rebecca threw back her head, helpless to stifle her cries of delight while he

lavished kisses over her throat, his hands and body urging her ever higher.

At last, pleasure crashed over them in waves, binding them together in a perfect moment of bliss. She clung to him as the tremors subsided, her heart overflowing with love for the man in her arms.

Replete, he cradled her close, his breaths ragged as he struggled to regain control. He buried his face in her hair, overcome with emotion. Never had he imagined such profound joy and completion.

He lifted his head to gaze into her eyes, darkened with passion and filled with tenderness. “You are my heart, my home, my everything,” he whispered, brushing a stray curl from her cheek. “I shall love you always.”

She smiled, tears shimmering on her lashes. “As you are mine, my love.”

Camden kissed her then, a sweet, lingering kiss full of emotion and promise. He rolled onto his back, gathering her close so she lay half atop him.

Rebecca rested her head on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. A profound contentment stole over her, the culmination of a journey that had begun in enmity and ended in love.

Camden stroked Rebecca’s hair, his touch feather-light. A deep sense of contentment suffused him. This was where he was always meant to be. Here in this ancient castle, with the woman who held his heart, he had found peace at long last. He pressed a kiss to her brow, breathing in her scent. She smelled of lavender and desire, an intoxicating combination that stirred

his blood. Yet he was content to simply hold her, to listen to her soft breaths and feel the warmth of her skin against his.

“I can think of no better way to begin our own forever,” she said.

“Nor can I,” he said, nuzzling her neck.

His lips joined with hers, a gentle yet passionate kiss that ignited a fire within her soul and promised a love that would last an eternity. Passion’s lasting promise built on a legacy of love.

Excerpt: One Wanton Wager



Blurb

In a world where desire ignites with a single touch, Lady Daphne Summerville and the audacious Earl of Bedford, Alex Beauchamp, engage in a daring wager that tests the boundaries of their hearts. As stolen kisses fuel a hidden passion, their game of hearts leads them to a reckoning of love, desire, and the perilous dance between reason and recklessness.

Keep reading for an excerpt from *One Wanton Wager*

Chapter 1



Northumberland, summer, 1816

Daphne Sumerville, the widowed Viscountess Gilford, sat opposite her sisters-in-law sipping tea. She lowered her teacup and gave Rebecca and Phoebe a bright smile. Rebecca and Camden had returned to Northumberland yesterday after having departed nearly a year ago and Daphne was thrilled to see her again. She'd missed Rebecca dearly during her absence.

Phoebe, Rebecca's twin, had missed her just as much. Perhaps more, for the moment the sun crested the horizon this morning, she'd rushed over, dragging Daphne in her wake. Not that she would complain, for she, too, had been bursting with excitement at the couple's arrival.

Daphne glanced around the castle's solar before returning her attention to Rebecca. "It's good to have you back, but wouldn't you be more comfortable at your parents' house?"

"Oh, yes, you know you would." Phoebe squealed, her eyes lighting. "You cannot possibly wish to stay here with scarcely any furniture and only a couple of borrowed servants."

Rebecca shook her head then took a sip of her tea. "You well know how much I love Almerry. Besides, I've

reconsidered my prior stance and we are renovating.”

Daphne could not keep the shock from her expression. Rebecca had been adamant about keeping the castle as a monument to Sir Aristin and Lady Isabel, the last couple to reside within these walls more than a hundred years prior. “What changed your mind?” she asked, unable to curb her growing curiosity.

“I think Sir Aristin and Lady Isabel brought Camden and I together. Their legacy is strong, their love still flows through the walls and across the landscape of Almerry. They would be pleased to see the castle restored to its prior beauty and brimming with life and love once more.” Rebecca cast a wistful glance around the solar, a small grin pulling at her lips. “This is home.”

“I see your mind is set.” Phoebe’s shoulders slumped, but only for a moment. “It will be a grand castle when you have finished.”

Daphne nodded. “Indeed, and what’s more, I believe you are right. Sir Aristin and Lady Isabel would approve.”

Rebecca’s eyes sparkled with delight as she set her teacup on the table Camden had built when he’d first arrived at Almerry a year ago. “I want the two of you to help me decorate. I’d like to maintain a medieval feel. Do my best to honor their memory as we refurbish.”

“What fun,” Phoebe said. “When do we begin?”

“Camden is in town with his cousin, Alex—”

“The connoisseur of women?” Phoebe gasped.

Daphne nearly choked on her tea. “The what?”

Phoebe gave a mischievous grin. “Rebecca has written to me about him. He’s an earl and enjoys the company of many women. Lord Brunsford prides himself on being a connoisseur of women.” She turned toward Rebecca, “Isn’t that right?”

“Indeed. But he’s truly a kind man. No doubt a rogue, but a rather lovable one if I dare say so.” Rebecca reached for the teapot then poured herself another cup.

Daphne would have to take her word for that because she had no intention of becoming familiar with such a man. She did hope to someday remarry, in fact, she would have to before long. She’d already been a widow for more than three years and felt exceedingly bad about accepting financial assistance from Lord and Lady Chesterfield. There was Henry to consider as well. Her son would require more as he grew older. Yes, she needed a husband, and soon. However, a rogue would never suit.

“I cannot wait to meet him.” Phoebe flipped open her fan and waved it with flair.

Rebecca reached out, stilling the fan. “He’s been warned to leave you alone.”

“Why?” Phoebe snapped the fan closed and lowered it back to her lap. “I’ve never been in the presence of such a man and was rather looking forward to it.”

“There is your answer, dear sister. A man like him would charm your socks off before you realized the threat his syrupy words held.” Rebecca smiled. “Do stop pouting. I am certain you will have many admirers among the guests at Mother and Father’s annual house party.”

“I doubt that very much. Mother invites the same families every year and it has yet to garner me any serious suitors.”

Phoebe bit the inside of her cheek. “I’ve grown weary of waiting. I want to fall in love and start a family of my own.”

Rebecca took her hand, giving a little squeeze. “I know you do, and so you shall.”

“But a rogue would not help you to accomplish that goal,” Daphne added.

Rebecca gave another squeeze before releasing Phoebe’s hand. “You cannot rush love. It finds you when it is ready. She’s right about that.”

“Right about what?” Camden strolled into the solar, going to Rebecca and dropping a kiss on the top of her head.

Daphne’s gaze locked on the tall gentleman who walked in behind him. Mercy, he was handsome. Midnight colored hair brushed his neck and temples. His bright green eyes were framed in dark lashes, and his nose, mouth, and jaw were so well formed they could have been carved from granite.

Her gaze trailed lower, taking in his wide shoulders then following the lines of his toned body down to his tapered waist and muscular thighs. He may be the finest specimen of masculinity she’d ever laid eyes on. It wasn’t hard to understand why women threw themselves into his bed.

When she raked her gaze back up his form, his eyes meet hers, a glint of amusement lighting them. She should look away but found herself too captivated to break free. Then he smiled, revealing perfect polished teeth behind a toe-curling rakish grin. She swallowed hard, ripping her gaze from his. Heat flamed across her cheeks.

“Oh, nothing important.” Rebecca waved her hand through the air dismissing the subject. “Tell us, how did you fare in town?”

Daphne turned her attention to Camden, eager to hear what he had to say. Not because she thought his words would interest her so much as because she needed the distraction.

“First, you must introduce me to these lovely creatures.” The rogue stepped closer to Daphne.

“Oh, yes, of course.” Rebecca stood. Phoebe and Daphne did as well.

“Lord Brunsford, may I introduce you to my sister, Lady Phoebe.”

Phoebe dipped a curtsy.

Lord Brunsford bowed before taking her hand and dropping a kiss on her glove-covered knuckles. “Do call me Alex. We are family after all.”

“Indeed.” Phoebe beamed a bright smile. “And you shall call me Phoebe.”

Lord Brunsford turned his attention to Daphne.

Rebecca gave a nod. “And this is my sister-in-law, Daphne Sumerville, Viscountess Gilford.”

The rogue wasted no time taking her hand, his lips lingering far longer than they should before he pulled back to gaze at her. The heat in his eyes caused her stomach to tighten in a most unsettling way. “Please call me Alex.” His voice, deep and husky, spoke of anything but propriety.

Daphne swallowed past the tightness in her throat, then nodded. She would not use his given name but hadn’t the will to say as much. Regardless, he would soon figure it out. Or better yet, he never would, because she had no intention of spending time in his company.

Rebecca lowered herself back onto the sofa. “Now, do join us and tell me about your trip to town.”

Daphne returned to her chair, grateful that the rogue could not sit beside her. A temporary joy as he quickly came to stand near the chair. But then, she supposed he hadn’t any other choice. The room was sparsely furnished, containing only a sofa, chair, and table. Camden rested his hip on the arm of the sofa near his wife and Phoebe sat beside her. There truly wasn’t anywhere else for Lord Brunsford to dwell.

Nonetheless, she found his nearness unsettling. Determined to scrub the man from her mind, she focused on Camden.

“We were met with some success. Alex managed to hire a handful of laborers to begin work on the castle while I put out inquiries for servants and ordered supplies.” He grinned at Rebecca. “Be sure to leave time in your schedule tomorrow to conduct interviews and select furniture.”

Her eyes sparkled. “I am very much looking forward to the task.”

“I fear it may take most of the day. Potential servants will begin arriving around ten in the morning. Maids, a cook, footmen, and a butler were all inquired after. Of course, if you desire any additional servants, you have leave to hire them.”

Rebecca gazed at Camden, love bursting from within the depths of her eyes. “And what of the tradesmen?”

“They are set to call later in the afternoon. Expect them around five. I fear you will have samples of fabrics and catalogs galore to consider.”

“How splendid. I can scarcely wait.” She glanced from Phoebe to Daphne. “And the two of you will help me. Say you

will.”

Rebecca’s excitement was contagious. “It shall be our honor to do so,” Daphne said, excitement blooming within her chest.

“While you ladies are busy with that, Alex and I will be helping the laborers and determining what repairs need to be made,” Camden said.

Drat. Daphne had gotten carried away in Rebecca’s eagerness and forgotten about the rogue who even now stood too close to her. She feared it may be impossible to avoid him. All the same, she would do her best.

What other choice did she have? She slanted her gaze to him, her cheeks warming. The mere sight of him sent her body into a tangle of desire. There was no way she could trust herself in his company.

GET ONE WANTON WAGER

About Amanda Mariel

Amanda Mariel, an accomplished wordsmith, holds dual master's degrees in liberal arts and education, specializing in the captivating realms of history and literature. Beyond her academic pursuits, she embraces the joyful chaos of motherhood, tending to both her cherished teenagers and her trio of adored fur babies. Among them, a noble Bernese Mountain Dog named Blaze, and two cats of distinct character, Ezra and Puff, share their home.

A *USA Today* Bestselling luminary, Amanda Mariel conjures vivid tapestries of eras long past, drawing inspiration from the languid cadence of days gone by. With pen poised and imagination unfurled, she traverses the annals of time, weaving tales that illuminate historical landscapes with finesse and flair. Her creative spirit finds respite in reading, traversing new horizons through travel, and capturing moments through the lenses of both her camera and artistic endeavors. Yet, it is in the embrace of family that she finds her truest sanctuary.

To delve deeper into Amanda's captivating world visit to www.amandamariel.com. While there, an invitation to join her newsletter promises a gateway to the latest from Amanda Mariel's literary treasury, and an opportunity to claim a complimentary eBook.

Amanda's passion extends to her readers, welcoming their voices and stories into her narrative realm. Engage with her through email at amanda@amandamariel.com, or connect via her social Media channels.

Amidst the prose and parchment, Amanda Mariel etches a profound connection, bridging eras, hearts, and minds, creating a legacy that resonates through the corridors of time.



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* * *

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A Lady's Guide to Marriage



TABETHA WAITE

This story is dedicated to anyone who might have been, or is still struggling in their relationship. Never doubt in the power of true love.

One



A lady must never use foul language...

Lady A's Advice Column

London, England

May 1818

Lady Albina Baine muttered an obscenity under her breath as she crumpled the paper and threw it in on the floor with the others. *Absolute bloody rubbish.* She sighed.

Unfortunately, for one of London's most popular writers for newly married ladies, this was undoubtedly a problem. It was getting rather difficult to publish advice for innocent minds when she started to believe that anything she wrote was nothing more than pure... well, *rubbish.*

“Struggling with a bit of author's impediment?”

Albina threw down her quill, ignoring it when the ink splattered on the blank pristine sheet of vellum before her. “I would say it's more of a complete *obstruction* at this point.” She returned irritably, as she turned to face her dearest friend and confidante, Mrs. Lydia Langley. The widow was such a continual presence at Baine House that the butler didn't even

announce her anymore, just let her have free reign of the household. “I daresay I’m going to start writing Gothic fiction for Minerva Press like you.”

Lydia sat down in one of the wing chairs by the fireplace and shook her dark head, immersed with threads of silver. Albina walked over and settled into the other.

“As much as I love writing stories about dark halls and suspicious characters,” her friend noted. “It’s not the genre for you, and you know it as well as I do.”

Albina had to concede that Lydia was right, but then she didn’t feel like anything made sense to her anymore. She had started this advice column a little more than five years ago after giving some encouragement to her daughter, who had recently become engaged. Mary had been harboring a few reservations about marrying a man that she didn’t initially love, but who was a good, kind match in every other way.

After Albina had convinced her eldest child that what she was feeling was perfectly natural, a simple case of the jitters, she decided that she had

AN INNATE TALENT FOR SOOTHING THE FEARS OF NEW BRIDES, so she decided to put pen to paper and try to make a difference in the lives of others who might be reluctant to join the bonds of matrimony.

Each month since she’d offered a new secret to a long and happy marriage — but there was a secret that Albina didn’t reveal.

None of it was true. A wife shouldn’t be biddable and meek, succumbing to her husband’s every demand. It was such

an antiquated way of thinking that Albina was ashamed for believing the lie for as long as she had. She didn't like to think of herself as a fraud, but when you merited advice to others when your own relationship had been on rough ground for years, what else was she to think?

"Maybe it's time you took a break," Lydia suggested.

Albina threw up her hands. "And do what? Writing is the only thing that's kept me sane in this empty house for..." *Five years*. She didn't say it out loud because she didn't like admitting that she and her husband had been apart for that long. It made her feel like a failure as a wife. Then again, he hadn't bothered to remain and try to make things work either.

She'd told herself, at the onset of their separation, that after a lengthy marriage it was only natural for the sparkling adoration of any new relationship to wane, and that was only *if* one was lucky enough to marry for love.

But *had* she truly been in love with him? Or was it merely attraction that had faded with time?

At first, the allure of the dashing, Michael Baine, Viscount Beauley, had been rather exciting, as he had been one of the finest bachelors on the marriage mart during her debut season. Albina still remembered the first time she'd been introduced to him at a society ball, and her heart had instantly skipped a beat. He had a smile that could charm the very birds from their trees, and the most hypnotic, warm brown eyes that she'd ever seen. He was tall, with dark hair, and filled out his well-tailored clothes rather nicely. For an impressionable girl of eighteen, she had not been immune to his appeal, believing that he was the most handsome man to ever grace the earth at five and twenty.

She remembered that breathless anticipation when he'd first called upon her at her parents' home. She couldn't believe that such a man could be interested in a naïve girl like her. But all through their courtship, he showered constant attention on her, complimenting everything from her attire, to her copper red hair and hazel eyes. But looking back, Albina knew what really made her fall in love with Chael was his sense of humor.

There was a sudden pang in her heart when she remembered the night

SHE'D INTRODUCED HER PERSONAL NICKNAME FOR HIM. THEY had been at the theatre and she'd teasingly emphasized the second half of his name. It rather sounded more like "chale," but somehow it had stuck.

When he'd proposed shortly thereafter, it was the most joyous day of her life.

"Have you thought about going home?" Lydia asked softly.

Albina frowned. "What are you talking about? I'm home right now—

" She abruptly broke off, for she realized her friend wasn't speaking of Baine House, but rather Beauley Hall. In the five years, she had known Lydia, it was the first time she'd ever remarked upon the estrangement between herself and Chael. They had shared every other confidence from raising children, to writing, and everything in between, but that subject had always been rather off limits, almost taboo.

But now, she realized that it was time she discussed the matter with someone. It wasn't as though she could continue

on as she had for the past five years, turning a blind eye to the only subject that she'd had difficulty facing herself.

Albina shrugged lightly. "I've never considered it before. My writing always kept me in London."

"Perhaps a reprieve is what you need right now," Lydia suggested. "A change of scenery to help get you past this writing hurdle." She paused.

"Maybe this is a sign."

Albina turned to stare into the fire as she considered her friend's words. Her hands twisted in her lap, but she forced them to still. It was odd that just the idea of facing Chael again could have her so anxious.

But it hadn't always been that way.

From the start of their marriage, there was no denying that there was plenty of passion. There had been times that they failed to even leave the bedchamber because of their need for each other. But after the arrival of their two daughters, as well as differing priorities that slowly took them in opposite directions, things began to change, and they'd begun to grow apart.

After their third child was born, their son and eventual heir, Albina could still see the adoration in her husband's eyes, but she could tell it was beginning to dim. He started to spend more time at his club, and by the time Conner grew old enough to attend university, Chael abruptly announced one evening at the dining table that he was retiring to their country estate. He said that he no longer cared for life in London, and now that Mary and Sarah were married, and their son was grown, he was ready

TO LIVE OUT THE REST OF HIS DAYS ENJOYING THE POPULAR outdoor pursuits that he used to enjoy.

Albina had been so stunned that she hadn't done anything but murmur a silent assent, when inside she was screaming and begging him to stay.

But it was what he'd said that kept her entreaty locked tightly away. He'd said he didn't care for life in London anymore, but what she heard was that he no longer cared for *her*.

The rest of that evening, as they'd retired to the parlor to play their usual game of chess, she'd forced herself to remain detached, conducting herself with the decorum expected of a titled, married lady. She wished him well that night and eventually excused herself and went to her room where the bitter tears she'd cried drenched her pillow.

The next morning, he was gone.

Fortunately, any self-pity hadn't lasted long. She'd picked her broken heart off the floor, and returned to her chamber and the only thing that made sense to her. It was during those disheartening days that *Lady A's Advice Column* was born.

Now, as her twenty-fifth wedding anniversary approached, she began to wonder if it was even possible to relive the magic of those early days, to feel as if she could smile without reservation, as if her heart still wasn't shattered from Chael's desertion.

For the past five years, she'd inwardly mourned his loss as if he'd gone to his grave, pride and fear of her reception at Bealey Hall keeping her firmly planted in the city. But she realized that, not only did she miss *him*, but their *life* together as well. Granted, they offered a brief correspondence from

time to time, but a few scrawled words on a sheet of vellum didn't account for strong arms holding her close, or the intimacy to be found in a marriage bed.

For the first time since she'd met Lydia, Albina allowed those old insecurities to take form in words. "What if he dismisses me?" She swallowed heavily. "Or has someone else?" While she had remained faithful to Chael during their time apart, she had never been daring enough to ask the same of him, even though she had never heard any gossip to confirm that he had taken a mistress. But after so long...

Lydia reached out and squeezed her hand. "You can't change the past, Albina. All you can do is look to the future. You just have to ask yourself if your relationship is worth saving." She stood. "I'll leave you to think it over."

Albina remained where she was for an interminable length of time, memories clouding and twisting in her mind to rival the swirls of the fire

IN THE GRATE. FINALLY, AS DUSK BEGAN TO FALL, SHE ROSE TO her feet and returned to her desk.

She picked up a fresh sheet of paper and dipped her pen in the inkwell. First, she wrote a hasty letter to her publisher, letting him know that any future columns would be put on hold because she was going to the country and she wasn't sure when she might be back. He might not care for her abrupt missive, but for the past five years, she had written for his paper like clockwork and earned him a lot of readers.

It was time she did something for herself.

Next, she wrote to her husband to let him know she was coming home.



MICHAEL SAT AT THE DESK IN HIS STUDY AND HELD HIS WIFE'S letter in his hand. He'd read it through countless times, that familiar feminine script usually so formal and disjointed.

But not this time.

At long last, his greatest hopes were coming true. She was coming back to Beauley Hall. Just the thought of seeing her again was enough to cause his hand to shake. He gently laid the paper on the desk in his study, right over the estate book he'd been perusing. Any further work would have to wait, for the numbers were a jumbled mess after reading that letter.

It shouldn't have been so imperative, and yet it was.

In truth, it made all the difference.

He steepled his hands before him. For years, he'd been wondering if he'd done the right thing that day by leaving Albina. But he felt it was the only option left to gain a connection between them.

If such a thing could even be accomplished.

He remembered with vivid clarity the first time he'd set eyes upon the copper-haired debutante in her virginal white dress. She had literally stopped him in his tracks, although he wasn't sure she'd even noticed; she was so caught up in her first ball of the London season, talking and chatting with a group of other young hopefuls.

Thankfully, he'd known the hostess that night, and after approaching her for an introduction to the lady in question, he found that his footsteps nearly stumbled as he'd been introduced to Miss Albina Waterton. She was even more lovely up close, and he knew the moment he looked into those charming, hazel eyes, that she was the one for him.

BUT OVER TIME, AND THE STRESS OF RAISING A FAMILY, HE could tell that it had all started to wear her down. She'd always wanted to write but claimed that she never had the time, so he'd started going to his club more often in order that he might not be another burden. But as things had continued to deteriorate, he'd known he would have to do something drastic in order to regain the affection that had waned between them.

So, in the end, he'd set her free.

Granted, in hindsight, he could have gone about things a bit differently, but what was done was done. At the time, he thought he'd been doing her a service, and had convinced himself of the same when she'd written to him and told him of her blooming advice column.

The smile that had graced his face that day had been the first genuine one in months, because he had known she was happy. Where he had failed, her writing had succeeded.

But as the months turned into years and he'd found himself staring at the same, four walls, his chest ached, because he wished, above all else, that Albina was there to share his days with him. Unfortunately, he wasn't so much of an insensitive jackass that he might rip away her only joy. So in spite of his stubborn pride, he'd stayed away.

But now, at long last, she was coming home.

To him.

And another smile graced his lips.

Two



A lady must always be punctual...

Lady A's advice column

Norfolk, England

June 3, 1818

Albina held her reticule tightly in her grasp. She pursed her lips together in irritation, for her teeth were about to be jarred out of her head from the uneven roads they traversed across the English countryside.

From the beginning, this day was not going as planned, and she began to wonder if all of this nonsense was a mistake. Before they'd ever left Baine house that morning, John Coachman had told her that there would be a delay because one of the horses had thrown a shoe. Once that was fixed, they were delayed by a sudden bout of torrential rainfall that just happened to start the moment they left London. Although the day had eventually cleared, the storm resulted in the miserable conditions she now had to endure.

Once again, she chastised herself by allowing Lydia to talk her into this asinine journey. This entire trip had been beyond her good reasoning, and obviously something was trying to tell her to remain in London. And yet, here she sat in her carriage as it carried her ever closer to the shores of Yarmouth.

Beauley Hall was situated about a mile or so from the village, on the bluffs overlooking the North Sea. And while Albina might have been reticent about seeing Chael again, she was curious about the changes that had been wrought in the picturesque seaside hamlet since her absence. She had heard that the Naval Pillar, a monument that was being erected to honor Admiral Nelson for his services during the Napoleonic Wars was nearly completed. Of course, Yarmouth was rich in history already, from the Church of St. Nicholas, built by the first bishop of Norwich, as well as the Royal Naval Hospital.

She had nearly forgotten how much she'd enjoyed her time there.

During the first few years of their marriage, when the children had been in the nursery, Albina and Chael had been content in this part of the country, with the salty tang of the sea teasing their nostrils, and the brisk wind caressing their face. For that brief time, that passed all too quickly, she knew those had been some of the happiest days of her life. Not until

THEY'D MOVED BACK TO THE SMOKE AND CONGESTION OF THE city to prepare Mary and Sarah for their debuts, did it all truly start to fall apart.

In London, they were expected to behave and act a certain way so as not to get the gossipmongers prattling behind their

fans. There, they had always been the esteemed, Viscount and Viscountess Baine.

In Yarmouth, while they still had a reputation to uphold, things had been so much... simpler. They'd had a good camaraderie with the villagers, their tenants, and their loyal servants. Every year, to celebrate the summer solstice, they would hold an annual party on St. John's Eve at Beauley Hall, where everyone, no matter their station, was invited to attend. Compared to the London events that were staid and perfectly polite, Beauley Hall's entertainments were vastly different. From a bonfire, to games that included guests of all ages, to enough food to feed the English army, it was something that was enjoyed by all every year.

Strange, but a part of Albina almost yearned for those days, to return to when her relationship with Chael had been comfortable, if no longer quite as passionate or exciting as when they were newly wed.

But then every year, after the merriment had died down, Chael would lead her upstairs to their chamber, and at midnight of their anniversary, on St. John's Day...

Albina closed her eyes and released a breath.

The memory of their wedding night came unbidden to her mind. She had been an innocent, but while she could tell that Chael was eager to consummate their union he had been so tender and gentle that tears had sprung to her eyes. Even now, she could feel those strong hands caressing her, the weight of his body on top of her as he slowly entered her...

Her eyes snapped open, and for the first time in years, a familiar sensation as old as time itself stole over her. *Desire*. It was as if with every turn of the carriage wheels toward Beauley Hall, bringing her closer to her husband, she was

inundated by impure thoughts. Her mind might claim to be sensible, but her body was starting to betray her.

This could be a very interesting homecoming, indeed.



MICHAEL DIDN'T WANT TO ADMIT THAT HE'D BEEN STARING out the front parlor window, but the truth couldn't very well be denied. Especially since he knew the exact moment his wife's carriage arrived because he'd been pacing about the floor, looking for it for the better part of the day. After night had fallen, he had begun to wonder if she might have changed her

MIND. HE'D ALMOST EXPECTED IT SINCE SHE SEEMED TO LOVE life in the city so much.

But the moment he heard the sound of horse hooves and the rattle of carriage wheels in the drive, his heart seized in his chest. He hadn't considered how they might greet one another. He wasn't sure he could handle a brief, polite greeting, but neither did he imagine Albina wanting him to grab her and kiss her soundly on the lips either. After all, they weren't in their twenties anymore. Mature men approaching fifty years of age should act in a polite manner toward an estranged wife. Right?

Perhaps he'd just wait for her to make the first move. Let it be *her* choice how she wanted to approach this reunion. After he'd received her letter, he'd been hoping that her arrival was to be a renewal of their feelings for one another, but just

seeing her, sitting across from her at the dining table again — if that was all she wanted, it would have to be enough.

He waited for her at the top of the stone steps that led into the sprawling manor, while a footman assisted her out of the carriage. By the soft light illuminating the lower floors and spilling into the courtyard, he caught a glimpse of a slender, gloved hand, then a dainty booted foot, followed by an elegant straw bonnet adorned with ribbons and flowers. It wasn't until she lifted her head and Michael caught sight of that familiar face that he found himself sucking in a breath.

For all that he'd mentally prepared himself for her arrival, he hadn't anticipated this sudden rush of pleasure — and *desire* — that coursed through his body, the moment those hazel eyes lifted to his. The urge to close the distance between them and crush her body to his was almost overwhelming, but he forced himself to wait.

To hope.

Michael didn't take his eyes off of Albina as her trunks were unloaded and carried past him. Nothing mattered at this moment but drinking his fill of the wife he'd left behind. With her reticule in her grasp, she walked toward him, proud and just as elegant as he'd known her to be, the epitome of a true lady of the ton, a woman he'd always been proud to hold on his arm.

God, I've been a fool for staying away as long as I have — for leaving in the first place.

He clenched his fist at his side as she stopped in front of him. Time melted away, and even though nearly twenty-five years of marriage had changed her features and form slightly, had dimmed the bright luster of her copper red locks into a more subdued strawberry-blond, a few wisps

FRAMING HER FACE AS THEY TRIED TO ESCAPE HER BONNET, HE knew without a doubt, that if he had a second chance, he would choose to marry her all over again.

She was the love of his life, and it was past time that he told her exactly how he felt.

He started to open his mouth, to finally speak the words clogging his throat.

“Hello, Michael.”

Albina offered him a slight smile, inclining her head slightly, before she turned and walked into the house.

And all at once — let him know where she stood.

Swallowing down his bitter disappointment, he followed her inside.



“I TRUST YOUR JOURNEY WAS PLEASANT.”

Albina cringed inwardly at the perfect, masculine sound of his detached voice. After five years, he might have come up with something a bit more to say. *What is wrong with you!* She wanted to shout at him, to ask if he even cared about her anymore, but at least she knew where she stood with him.

Now, if he had rushed to the carriage and dragged her into his arms and kissed her senseless...

But then, those were the fantasies of a young debutante, and not appropriate for a mature woman who had been

married for more than two decades, who had shared everything from a bed, to children, to sorrow and happiness with this man.

At this point, Albina had to ask herself what was left.

She feared that the answer would be... *nothing*.

But then, that wasn't true for her, was it? She wanted him as much as she ever had before. The instant she had set eyes on her husband it was as if they had never been apart. He was still just as handsome as ever, even if a bit of silver had colored his dark hair slightly at the temples. He still had the same chiseled lips and jawline; those eyes still the color of warm chocolate. More importantly, he still had the power to make her heart thump in her chest, even if he seemed blissfully unaware of it.

But then, she'd never encouraged his attentions lately either, so she supposed she couldn't really blame him for something for which he wasn't wholly to blame. They both had their faults.

ALBINA HANDED HER GLOVES AND CLOAK OVER TO THE butler, noticing that he was different from the one she remembered. "What happened to August?"

she asked Michael.

He had his hands in his pockets, regarding her evenly, with no apparent hint of any kind of emotion. "He died about three years ago. This is Jeffries."

The servant bowed deeply. "My lady."

As a footman came forward to take care of her things, Michael said,

“You always dressed in the height of fashion,” he murmured.

Albina looked down at her plum velvet traveling dress. Michael was eyeing it with a touch of admiration—or criticism, she wasn’t quite sure.

In turn, she wasn’t sure if she should take offense at his statement, but she decided to take it as a compliment. It wouldn’t do for their first night together to be spent arguing. “You know it’s rather expected in London, although I’ve had this dress for at least two seasons. I’ve just never had the occasion to wear it before now. I don’t normally venture that far from home.”

Home. Meaning Baine House and not Beasley Hall.

She winced at her slip, but he didn’t appear to notice, or else he chose not to comment on it. To break the awkward silence, she told him of her troubles since leaving London and the reason for her tardiness. She knew she was probably babbling, but he didn’t say a word, just listened.

At the end of her explanation, he said, “After such a harrowing journey I imagine you might want to freshen up.” He paused. “Your rooms are prepared, so I can have some tea and some supper brought up to your room if you don’t wish to come back downstairs.”

“Thank you, but that’s perfectly fine. I’ll join you in the dining hall shortly.” She turned to go, but his softly spoken words stopped her.

“Actually, I’ve been taking my meals in the parlor of late. It seems rather unnecessary to drag out all the fine china when I’m dining alone.

But if you wish to adhere to the formalities—”

She turned back to him, trying to ignore the fact that she suddenly felt like a stranger in the same house that had given her so many pleasant memories, the same place that had always felt like more of a home than Baine House ever truly had. “The parlor is fine, Michael.”

This time she did go, for she feared if she remained any longer, he would see the well of tears filling her eyes.



MICHAEL WATCHED HIS WIFE’S CURVACEOUS FIGURE CLIMB THE stairs until she disappeared from view. He blew out a breath before going to his study where a slightly used bottle of brandy waited for him. He only drank on certain occasions, and tonight was certainly turning out to be one of them.

He poured a finger’s worth of amber liquid into the glass and slammed it back in one swallow, savoring the burn of alcohol and hoping it would manage to numb his senses, if only for a little while. *Damn, but that was awkward...*

Even during the early days when he’d been courting Albina, had he ever felt so out of place, and at such a loss of what to say? Then again, she had been an innocent girl who’d hung on his every word, whereas now...

needless to say it was going to take quite a bit more coercion on his part to woo her again — if that was even possible.

Either way, he knew that they might never be as close as they were back then, but at least he had to try. It had nearly killed him to leave her five years ago, but he’d always been under the impression that when someone was loved enough

they should be set free. So that's what he'd done. But as he'd lain awake at night, the opposite side of his bed cold and lonely, he found he'd hated himself for it. More than once he'd nearly ordered his horse to be saddled when the pain in his chest had become too tight to bear, the long separation from Albina making it hard to breathe, but then he'd come to his senses and remind himself that he was doing all of this for her.

He would recall the strain about her mouth and the sadness that tinged those beautiful eyes in the months leading up to his departure, and it would tear him up inside. Albina had done her duty to her parents, to society, and even to him and their children, so it wasn't fair to demand even more of her.

He abruptly drained his glass with an angry scoff. *Well, wasn't I just the self-sacrificing hero?*

He'd subjected himself to a life of celibacy and isolation — for what?

Albina had treated him with the same reserve he'd left her with in London, yet she still maintained the ability to rip his heart out of his chest. All this time he'd been under the false hope that things would change, that when she returned it would be like when they'd first met. Sparks would fly, and the passion would reignite. Personally, his feelings hadn't ebbed with time. If nothing else, their absence had made his emotions grow stronger.

But she had just treated him as if they were strangers.

HE CLOSED HIS EYES. PERHAPS ALL OF THIS WAS A FOOL'S errand. He wanted to win Albina's heart back, but if he failed, he wasn't sure he could endure to let her go a second time.

In truth, it might very well destroy him.

Three



A lady must always keep her composure...

Lady A's Advice Column

Albina's fork scraped lightly against the side of her plate, yet the sound grated on her nerves as if a handful of nails had trailed down a schoolroom slate. Even though she had assured Michael that the parlor would be fine, she had returned downstairs in a simple, green muslin dress and found that the dining room was open and set with two place settings

— at opposite ends of the massive table.

It was nearly impossible to speak to one another, so they had greeted each other politely upon arrival and sat down to eat in a silence so deafening that even the ticking of the clock on the mantel caused her to grit her teeth in irritation.

She lifted her wineglass to her lips, only to find that it was empty.

With an inward sigh, she set it to the side and pushed her half-eaten stew away as she rose to her feet. "I believe I shall retire."

"Of course."

Her husband's disconnected voice was the last straw. Albina clenched her fists before she said something she shouldn't, then she turned and walked out of the room.

Instead of returning to her chamber, she found herself walking to the conservatory. It was the only place she could think of that might muffle a frustrated scream. She had used it as a place to escape on numerous occasions when she had lived here. The warmth of the enclosed, glass structure and the fragrant scent of flowers and herbs had gone far to soothe her troubles.

But when she opened the door, she froze in horror. The room was completely bare. Not even a speck of soil could be found. The only thing that remained was the possibility of life. It wasn't even that warm anymore, the glass around her now cold and unfeeling. *Nothing*.

It was too much.

Albina collapsed against the wall, the breath knocked out of her as surely as if she'd fallen. Violent tremors wracked her body as if her very soul was breaking apart from her human form. And perhaps it was. It had taken a bleak conservatory for her to admit the truth — that she was but a former shell of an otherwise happy existence.

“Albina?”

THE SOFTLY SPOKEN, MASCULINE QUERY HAD HER SWIPING AT her tear-streaked face as she turned to glare at him. She was suddenly very angry at Michael. Not only had he ruined her safe haven, but he had interrupted her at one of her weakest moments. “Where are all the flowers?” she asked a bit harshly.

He hesitated, eyeing her steadily. “I never had much of a green thumb, so I didn’t see the need in keeping up with something I was no good at.”

Albina clutched the edge of a bare table until her knuckles turned white. She stared at the stark emptiness before her and felt new tears blur her vision. “It was my favorite room at Beaufrey Hall,” she whispered.

“And now it’s... gone. You ruined it.”

“What did you expect me to do?” he countered gruffly. “Let it grow out of control?” He snorted. “You weren’t here. I didn’t see any point in paying for the upkeep.”

“It would have been better than erasing it all as if it never existed.”

She looked at him evenly. “As if *I* never existed.”

He jerked as if she’d struck him.

“I don’t know if I can ever forgive you for this.” Her words were soft, but filled with a painful bitterness. “I should just return to London tomorrow and forget all about this place.”

About you...



THE UNSPOKEN WORDS HUNG IN THE AIR LONG AFTER SHE’D gathered her skirts and swept out of the room, but Michael had felt every syllable as a direct arrow to his heart.

He hung his head in defeat. The first night she was under the same roof with him, and she was ready to leave already.

Well done, old chap.

He shoved a hand through his thick hair and blew out a deep breath.

He winced, remembering the accusing glare in her shimmering eyes. He had known that she'd loved this place more than any other room in the house, had found it relaxing tending to the new blooms of life and caring for those that were on the brink of death.

She believed that he'd intentionally torn apart her memories and ground them beneath his boot heel. And maybe, when he'd ordered this room to be cleared, that's what he'd done. At the time, he'd been angry, but more than that, he hadn't been able to bear to watch all those plants wither and die without Albina there to care for them.

SHE STILL DIDN'T UNDERSTAND THAT NONE OF IT MATTERED without *her*.

It never had.

He wanted nothing more than to make his marriage with Albina work, but it couldn't be one-sided. Either way, he certainly wasn't starting out on the right foot. Even if he ordered hundreds of hothouse blooms to be arranged in here tomorrow, it wouldn't erase the pain, the feeling of betrayal that he'd already caused her.

At this point, he was starting to think that no matter what he did, nothing would bring her love back to him.



ALBINA REQUESTED A TRAY IN HER ROOM THE NEXT MORNING. She wasn't quite prepared to face Michael just yet. She was still heart sore over the conservatory, even though she realized, in the light of day, that she might have overreacted. In truth, she *knew* she had. There was no call for her to have lashed out at him like she had. He'd spoken nothing but the truth.

After all, it wasn't as if flowers didn't have an expiration date without someone to care for them.

When her ladies' maid, Helen, who had accompanied her from London, brought in her breakfast tray, Albina glanced at it, surprised to see a single red rose lying beside the plate along with a neatly folded missive. Her hand shook as she opened the folded note.

I'm sorry. I should have warned you about the conservatory.

Please accept this as a peace offering so that we might begin anew.

—M

Albina pressed the letter against her heart before she picked up her fork and ate quickly. She carefully performed her morning ablutions, taking a lavender scented bath, while the whole time her nerves were thrumming with energy with the urgent need to see Michael and make amends. She sat at her dressing table while Helen brushed her hair. As she waited for Helen to pin her waist-length locks into a simple bun at her nape, Albina stared at her reflection with a critical eye.

She remembered, all those years ago, the moment she'd dressed for her first ball of the official London season. That night, she'd worn a white satin ball gown adorned with seed pearls. She knew it had cost her parents a near fortune to have specially made, but her mother had assured her that no cost would be spared for her daughter's special day. Since her only

OTHER CHILD WAS A SON, ALBINA'S BROTHER, ESPEN, THEIR mother had enjoyed lavishing beautiful gowns upon her.

Albina felt her throat tighten. Her mother had been gone for nearly seven years and there wasn't a day that went by that she didn't miss her.

Her father, while more gruff and severe, was another one that Albina had mourned when he'd passed away only six months later. Her grief had only been another obstacle that had taken a toll on her relationship with Michael. He had lost his parents when he was a child and was taken in by his aunt and uncle. While he had cared for them, as well as the cousins he'd grown up with, he hadn't understood the closeness that had always been shared by the Waterton family. But after her father died, even that broke apart.

Espen had already been married, so after gaining the title, he chose to move his family from London to the country estate in Kent. Since she was still in London, she only saw him around Christmastime anymore, and that was only briefly. She barely had any sort of relationship with her nieces and nephews. So many times she had considered going to stay for a few days, but she didn't want to feel like an imposition. And to be perfectly honest, she didn't want to be that eccentric,

spinster *aunt* who had failed to keep her marriage intact instead.

As Albina regarded her reflection, comparing it to that fateful day so long ago, she wondered what might have happened should Michael not have been at the ball that night. Would things still have turned out as they had? Or would she be married to someone else today?

The very idea made her nauseous, for in her mind, it had always been *him*. She couldn't imagine her life with anyone else.

But had *he* ever wished that his life had taken a different path?

Wide, hazel eyes stared back at her accusingly, because she'd never even let such a thought take root.

Because she feared what the answer would be.

Albina touched a strand of silver near her ear. These days she had been noticing more and more strands threading themselves through her hair, dimming the brilliant copper color of her youth. Her face still retained a smooth complexion, but she could see the signs of time starting to wear grooves near her mouth and eyes. She retained a slightly curvaceous figure, although after three children, the petite size she'd been at nineteen would likely never return.

But all these changes were testament to a life that was lived.

One couldn't very well do battle without gaining a few scars in the process.



BY TEN O’CLOCK ALBINA WAS ON HER WAY DOWNSTAIRS. SHE crossed paths with the housekeeper in the foyer, who greeted her warmly. “Oh, Lady Beauley! How lovely to have you back in residence at Beauley Hall.”

Albina had to smile. But then, most of the servants she had known so long ago had been more like family. Until now, Albina hadn’t realized how much she’d missed that connection, compared to the stiff, reserved staff she retained at Baine House.

For a moment, she had to blink at what five years had done to the veteran housekeeper. Mrs. Humphrey had been in her fifties when Albina and Michael had gone to London for their daughters’ debut seasons, but even back then, her dark hair was only shot through with bits of silver.

Now, the lighter shade nearly eclipsed all of the color. Her face was heavily lined with wrinkles, the dark contrast of her uniform causing the grooves to appear even deeper than Albina remembered.

But then, she supposed it had been nearly eight years since she’d seen Mrs. Humphrey.

How time changed even the slightest details, including one marked difference to the woman’s attire. “You wear spectacles now?” Albina noted.

The servant chuckled. “I do, my lady, and I fear I would be as blind as a bat without them. I certainly can’t fuss at the housemaids when I can’t tell who it is I’m reprimanding.”

Albina smiled. “Indeed, not.”

“Well, I suppose you’re looking for Lord Bealey.” The housekeeper clasped her hands before her. “He told me to tell you that he would be out for most of the morning. The land steward arrived around dawn to inform him of a drainage issue.”

Albina felt her brows rise. “The viscount *personally* assists with such matters?”

“Oh, yes, my lady.” Mrs. Humphrey nodded emphatically. “The master is very involved with his tenants. He’s a good man—” She instantly broke off, as if suddenly realizing her error. “But, of course you know that already, my lady,” she added hastily.

“Indeed, he is,” Albina agreed softly.

As the housekeeper walked away, the keys at her waist jingling with her movements, Albina glanced down at her hands. The woman was absolutely right. Michael was a good man, a *wonderful* man, really. He

HAD BEEN A PATIENT FATHER, A CONSIDERATE LOVER, AND IN all their years of marriage, he’d never laid a hand on her in anger or forced unnecessary demands upon her.

A fresh wave of guilt from the night before washed over her, and she vowed that when she saw her husband again, she would make sure to apologize for her harsh words. In light of all his other attributes, a bare room didn’t seem to matter much at all.

With some time on her hands waiting until Michael returned, Albina decided that she would go riding. The sun

was bright today, a rarity for England in the spring, so she intended to make the most of it. Not to mention that riding used to be one of her favorite pastimes when she was in residence at the Hall. She enjoyed a light canter in London, but she couldn't very well give her horse free rein in the city. So after returning upstairs to change into a plum velvet riding habit, she made her way outside and down to the stables.

The stable master was yet another new face to be found at Beauley Hall, but he was a kind, older gentleman who introduced himself as Mr.

Epperson. She liked him instantly. As Albina patted the soft nose of a dapple-gray mare named Lulu, waiting for her to be fitted with a sidesaddle, she struck up a conversation with the stable master.

“How long have you been working for the viscount, Mr. Epperson?”

she asked curiously.

He thought for a moment. “I would say about three years now, my lady. It's the best position that I've ever had.”

“Is it?”

“Oh, yes.” He nodded. “Anyone that works for the viscount is thankful for the employment. He's fair and kind, and the only place I know of where we get an entire Sunday off to be with our families.”

Albina felt a thoughtful frown form between her brows, and the guilt of her behavior the night before rose another notch. “That is rather charitable of him.”

As Mr. Epperson tied the last strap, he gave the mare a gentle scratch behind her ears. “She's all ready to go, my

lady.” He led the horse over to a mounting block and assisted Albina into the saddle.

“Thank you, Mr. Epperson.”

After tipping his hat to her, he walked away.



TWO HOURS LATER, ALBINA TROTTED BACK INTO THE STABLE yard, her cheeks flushed and her breathing heavy from her exertions.

Mr. Epperson was there to assist her down from the mare’s back.

“Did you have a nice ride?” he asked.

After she’d smoothed her skirts around her, she offered him a bright smile. “Most certainly. Lulu is a delight!” She patted the dappled nose, laughing slightly when the mare nickered at her. “I’d forgotten how calm one could feel after a brisk gallop through the countryside. Other than Hyde Park in London, there isn’t much occasion for it. It’s entirely too crowded.”

“I imagine so.” Mr. Epperson shook his head. “I’ve had little need to go to the city myself, and I’m glad of it. I’m content right here, looking after Lord Beauley’s horses.”

Albina studied him for a moment. Even though she had been well bred, brought up with fine dresses and the best education to be had, though she had never wanted for anything, she found that she was almost envious of the ease with which Mr. Epperson spoke of his day-to-day chores. He was a commoner, who had likely been brought up with very

little, expected to serve others from an early age, yet he appreciated something as simple as a stable full of horses to care for.

She sighed inwardly, thinking how nice it must be to be able to eschew the finer things in life and be able to live with such simple comforts. Unfortunately, as the daughter of a baron, then the wife to a viscount, she had never had that luxury.

In fact, the closest she had ever come to feeling such freedom was the last time she had been at Beauley Hall. How nice it would be to turn the clock back and relive those days. Unfortunately, all she could do now was move forward and hope that she might be able to find a portion of that careless abandon once more.

Maybe then, the words that had become absent would return to her.

Albina walked back to the house so lost in thought that she turned a corner — and ran right into a solid male chest.

Startled, she instantly stepped backward, but strong arms reached out to steady her. Her heart instantly began to beat at a steady gallop when she looked up and saw Michael, his tall form silhouetted by the sun at his back. He stood stiffly, as if he was too stunned by her presence to move, but then his jaw hardened and he released her, offering a curt nod. “Pardon me.”

HE STARTED TO MOVE PAST HER, THE ACTION FINALLY CAUSING her throat to work properly. “I wanted to apologize... for last night.” She swallowed heavily. This was turning out to be harder than she’d imagined.

He eyed her intently for a few seconds, a flash of... *something* in those brown eyes. Finally, he said evenly, "I was the one at fault. I should have told you."

She supposed that was as close to an acceptance that she was going to get as he strode up the stairs and disappeared into the house.

She followed him into the foyer where he was shrugging out of his muddied coat and boots before handing them off to the butler. Even with his trousers caked with mud, his sweat dampened shirt clinging to his still muscular body like a second skin, his cravat loosened as if he'd pulled on it in irritation, he still looked more handsome than any man she'd ever set eyes on.



MICHAEL FELT RESTLESS, AS IF A THOUSAND ANTS HAD suddenly taken it upon themselves to turn him into their hill. He wished he hadn't touched Albina when she'd collided into him, for while it was nothing more than a simple touch, an action that normally would have been inconsequential, just the sight of his hands on her caused a stirring in his loins that he'd long denied.

For five years, to be precise.

He swallowed hard at the rush of desire that surged to the surface. He had to get away from her now or else drag her upstairs and make love to her until they were so exhausted that neither of them could think straight.

"I need to get cleaned up," he murmured tightly.

When he started to move around her, she asked abruptly, “Is there anyone else left?”

He sighed, forced to turn back to her with a lifted brow.

Albina’s cheeks colored slightly, and he had to clench his fists at his sides to keep from taking her in his arms. She was the only mature, married woman of his acquaintance that still blushed like a debutante —

especially in the bedchamber.

He barely withheld a groan. “If you recall, after we went to London I closed up the estate, retaining only a skeleton crew, so most of the staff went to seek other positions. Other than the housekeeper and the cook, Mrs. Dryler, the rest moved on.”

INSTANTLY, HER HAZEL EYES LIT UP AND MICHAEL RECALLED, quite vividly, other times her eyes would sparkle so remarkably — when she was angry, incandescently happy — or when he brought her to the pinnacle of pleasure...

Damn. I have to stop this or else I’ll go mad.

“I wonder if she still makes those delicious strawberry tarts...” Albina closed her eyes and parted her lips on a delicious sigh.

Michael instantly froze, his gaze riveted to her mouth.

When Albina opened her eyes again, he heard the slight catch in her breathing when she looked at him. “Michael, I...”

“I’m sure Mrs. Dryler would be more than happy to accommodate you,” he said curtly. “Now, if you’ll excuse

me.” Turning on his heel, he went upstairs and called for a bath — an ice cold one.

Four



A lady must exercise eloquent speech...

Lady A's Advice Column

Albina sat at the servants' table in the kitchen with a cup of tea and bit into the soft, buttery crust with the burst of fruit flavor inside that could only be attributed to the Beasley Hall cook. Mrs. Dryler had been overjoyed to see that her mistress had returned, and had happily placed two of the desserts on a plate and set them before her.

"I always keep some on hand. You weren't the only one who appreciated my efforts, after all." Mrs. Dryler had given Albina a wink, before she hummed a tune and went back to kneading the bread dough on the counter, her hands and arms already coated with the white film of flour.

She was also blissfully unaware of how the words had caused Albina's chest to ache. Albina sat down the second half-eaten tart, her enjoyment of the delicacy not nearly as exciting as it had been a moment ago. Her stomach was suddenly rolling with fresh nerves, wondering how she might repair this rift between her and Chael.

She rose to her feet. “Thank you, Mrs. Dryler, but I can’t possibly eat another bite if I intend to have supper this evening.”

Albina returned upstairs, but instead of heading to her chamber, she made her way to the library. She was hoping that something in there might spark some inspiration for her writing. Once that issue was resolved, maybe then she could work on her husband.

But the moment she walked over the threshold, she saw Michael there, an open book in his palm and a pair of spectacles perched on his nose. On any other man, the sight might not have been so alluring, but on him, she had trouble tearing her eyes away.

His dark hair was still damp, giving credence to the fact he’d recently bathed, the clean scent of his soap and cologne teasing her nostrils, even from across the room. He’d shaved as well, the smooth line of his jaw well defined. Wearing only a white cambric shirt, green waistcoat, and buff trousers with a new pair of black boots, he looked entirely too attractive for her peace of mind.

She must have made some sort of noise, for he lifted his head and closed his book and removed his glasses, giving her an acknowledging incline of his head. “Albina.”

“MICHAEL.” SHE WAS PROUD OF HERSELF FOR KEEPING HER voice so even as she walked over to the bookshelves. She noticed that quite a few titles had been added in the intervening years, including several novels. She had to smile when she noticed her friend’s name on the spine of one.

Albina thought Michael would have left the room upon her arrival, but he surprised her by speaking. “Find anything of interest?”

She turned around to see him seated in the same chair, although his pose was more relaxed than before, his hands clasped across his midsection, with the hint of a smile touching the corners of his mouth. She held up the novel in her hand. “You bought Lydia’s book.”

He shrugged. “You spoke of her so eloquently in your letters.”

“She’s a talented author.” She eyed him curiously. “But surely *you* haven’t read it?”

“Actually, I have. It was quite good.”

“Indeed?” She snorted, lifting a brow. “What happened to the Viscount Beaufort whose only interests were non-fiction?”

Again, he shrugged. “I converted. Dared to try something new.”

“I see.” Albina felt her lips twitch as she slid the book back onto the shelf. It wasn’t as if she didn’t have her own copy in London, having read it so many times that the spine suffered from a permanent crease.

“You seem surprised,” Michael noted.

She decided the truth was best, so she turned to him and said,

“Actually, yes, I am. I just can’t see you reading a romantic novel.”

“And why not?” he countered. “Do you think I’m incapable of romance?”

“Of course not. I—”

But instead of waiting for her to finish, Michael’s brown eyes held hers as he recited; “*O my Luve’s like a red, red rose that’s newly sprung in June;*

O my Luve’s like the melodie that’s sweetly play’d in tune: As fair art thou, my bonnie lass, so deep in luv am I: And I will luv thee still, my dear, till a’ the seas gang dry. ”

Albina was so stunned that couldn’t even reply for a moment. When she did, her voice was little more than a whisper. “That was beautiful.”

“Yes, well.” He grinned crookedly, as if suddenly embarrassed.

“Robert Burns had quite a way with words.”

She nodded, recalling the name of the popular Scottish poet. The Bard of Ayrshire’s works had been recited all across London, an influx of Romanticism taking over the salons and ballrooms. But never before had

SHE HEARD THE POET’S WORDS RECITED WITH SUCH poignancy. The way Chael spoke, with true feeling — it touched her heart.

Could it be that he still loved her?

He abruptly rose to his feet. “I suppose you’d like some time alone.”

Before he could depart, she dared herself to ask, “I was going to go into the village tomorrow. Would you care to accompany me?”

He hesitated. “If you wish it.”

“I do.”

He must have read the sincerity in her gaze, for he said, “Very well.”

He inclined his head. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

Albina couldn’t keep a smile from blossoming on her face when he left. She felt she’d gained a victory this afternoon, however small.



MICHAEL SAT STARING AT THE ESTATE LEDGER IN HIS STUDY AS if it held the secrets to the universe, or could at least give him a glimpse into his wife’s mind.

Yesterday had been confusing to say the least. First, Albina had apologized for her outburst about the conservatory, which had surprised him. He thought she might have held on to her anger a bit longer. Because she didn’t, it gave him cause to hope.

At least, that was the only thing he could say to justify the fact he’d been spouting sonnets like some green lad. He still rolled his eyes about that one, and yet he’d meant every single word. No matter how all of this might play out with his wife, he would love her until the day he died.

Dinner had also been a little easier, less stilted than the first night.

They’d actually had a smooth conversation, but perhaps that was because they’d kept the subject on neutral ground and discussed their children.

Either way, it had been rather pleasant and when they'd finally parted ways, he had been looking forward to their trip into Yarmouth.

But as a new day dawned, so did the reservations that came with it.

He might have had one good day with Albina, but he was afraid that sparkle of excitement would soon fade from her gaze, that the enchantment of being back in the country would pale all too quickly when compared to her life back in the city.

He wanted to win Albina back at all costs, only not at the expense of her happiness.

A light knock came at the study door and Michael glanced up to see Jeffries standing in the frame. Michael gestured him inside as he set his

GLASSES ON THE LEDGER BEFORE HIM. IT WASN'T AS IF HE WAS getting much work done at this point anyway.

"A missive just arrived for you, sir."

Michael accepted the neatly folded paper and quickly tore the seal to read the few, hastily scribbled lines. "Damn," he muttered.

"Bad news, my lord?"

"You could say that." He blew out a breath. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Would you be so kind as to tell Lady Beaulley that I won't be able to join her this afternoon?"

"Of course, my lord."

As the servant bowed and left, Michael grabbed his jacket off the back of his chair and shrugged it on as he headed down

to the stables.

For every step he was taking forward with Albina, it seemed as if something always occurred to set him back two.



ALBINA HAD JUST FINISHED DRESSING FOR HER OUTING WITH Michael when she looked out her bedroom window and saw him riding away. A frown touched her brow about the same time there was a light knock at her door.

She opened it to reveal the butler on the other side.

Jeffries bowed respectfully. “The viscount asked me to relay his regrets as he is unable to accompany you to the village today.”

“Has something happened? Where is he going?”

“He did not inform me of his whereabouts, my lady.”

Albina’s frown deepened. “Very well, then. Thank you.”

As she shut her door after him, she began to pace the room, her mind racing. *What could have possibly called him away on such an urgent matter that he had to cancel our plans?* As far as she knew, the tenants weren’t having any problems, but she supposed that could change.

For a brief moment, she entertained the idea of a mistress, but dismissed it almost immediately. Surely if Michael was taking his pleasures away from the house, he would cease such activities while she was in residence.

Wouldn’t he?

Doubts swirled, teasing and taunting, until she gave up and grabbed her bonnet. She was tying it on her head as she marched downstairs.

Whether Chael chose to accompany her or not, she was determined to go ahead on her own.

HAVING NOTICED THE DAY BEFORE THAT HER HUSBAND HAD A phaeton in the stables, she asked for it to be brought around. The butler eyed her uncertainly for a moment, until she lifted her chin. Thus, he sent a footman to the stables to alert Mr. Epperson of her demands. While she wouldn't admit that she hadn't driven anything more difficult than a London chaise, and that was only because Lydia had one and had let her take the reins in Hyde Park one day, she was determined to set out on her own. It wasn't as if she required a cumbersome coach, nor a maid to accompany her, to ride a couple miles into the village.

As the black with yellow trim vehicle was brought into view, Albina was delighted to see that another lovely mare had been harnessed to the front. She knew that she would be just as docile as Lulu, and she thanked Mr. Epperson for his thoughtfulness.

She took a moment to coo to the animal, before she climbed into the driver's seat. As the stable master handed her the reins, she snapped the leather straps and set into motion.

It took Albina a moment to get used to the height of the carriage wheels, but once she did, it didn't seem that different from Lydia's open chaise, which also only took one horse to maneuver. Thankfully, it was also another unseasonably sunny and warm day. There were a few clouds building in the

distance, which might mean a slight shower later on, but that would likely be well after she was back home.

At this rate, it was turning out to be a rather pleasant trip indeed, so long as she didn't allow thoughts of Michael to linger.



THE VILLAGE OF YARMOUTH HADN'T REALLY CHANGED IN ALL the time she'd been away. It was still a bustling seaside resort that relied heavily on their fishing industry. Herring was such a valuable commodity, in essence the town's foundation, that most of the villagers built their houses right on the water, so that they might be the first out at sea.

Because of this success, money had been raised by the local magnates to build the Norfolk Naval Pillar; the columned statue standing proud and tall right at the edge of town. The lady Britannia stood atop a globe inscribed with the motto from Nelson's coat of arms, "*Palmas Qui Meruit Ferat*," translated to "Let Him Who Has Merited it Take the Palm." It was a true testament to the determination in battle that the English possessed. If Albina had never felt like a patriot to her country before, as she paused to admire the statue, she certainly felt it now.

SHE EVENTUALLY MOVED ON AND STOPPED AT THE LOCAL stables for her horse to enjoy some hay while she looked through some of the shops in town.

Many of them were just the same as she remembered, some of the local villagers even going so far as to recognize her from nearly a decade ago.

Although none of them seemed as pleased as the modiste, Mrs.

Brandt. “Oh, my lady! How lovely it is to see you again!” She offered a slight curtsy. “I daresay I’ve missed making your gowns.” She paused.

“You are here to have a special one made, no?”

Albina didn’t have the heart to decline. “Of course.”

“Wonderful!” The woman clasped her hands together in delight. “I have just the material in mind. Wait just a moment.” She held up a finger and then disappeared behind a curtain that led into her work area. She reappeared seconds later, carrying a lovely gray silk that caught the light from the window, making it appear to sparkle with a myriad of colors.

“It’s breathtaking,” Albina breathed as she reached out and rubbed a section of the fabric between her thumb and finger.

“And perfect for the celebration on St. John’s Eve!”

The woman literally beamed, although her words gave Albina pause.

“The viscount still holds the celebration each year?”

“Naturally.” The woman bobbed her head excitedly. “Lord Beauley makes sure of that. The entire village looks forward to it every summer solstice. It’s only a fortnight away. I do hope you will be joining us this year, my lady. That would be ever so nice. Now, if you’d just step into the back of my shop, I can get your measurements.”

The lady continued to prattle on as she pinned and murmured numbers to herself, but Albina was sadly distracted, so she participated very little in the conversation.

She'd had no idea that Michael had continued to host such an extravagant annual party and not even invite her. It rather stung that he had excluded her. Granted, they might not have been on intimate speaking terms for the past five years, but they'd still corresponded, and they were still husband and wife.

Did that not account for anything?

While she had always enjoyed St. John's Eve before, at this point, she wasn't sure if it would be something to celebrate this year — or if it would be just another day that passed.

She bid Mrs. Brandt goodbye shortly thereafter, the woman's well wishes following her out the door.

ALBINA STOOD IN THE STREET, THE EXCITEMENT OF THE DAY marred by the realization that Michael had obviously moved on with his life. Without her.

Her thoughts were miles away as she headed back to Beauley Hall.

She had to make a decision about whether her husband was worth fighting for, if their *marriage* was worth fighting for, or if it was time to abandon this quest before it was too late and there was no recovering from it.

She'd known all along that the true reason she'd returned to Yarmouth wasn't because she was trying to find the writing inspiration that had deserted her, but because she'd wanted to

try to repair things with Chael. But even she was smart enough to know when there was nothing left to salvage. Ever since her arrival, things had been strange and...

detached, as if she didn't belong there.

Perhaps it was time she returned to London.

Albina was moving along at a clipped pace when a flash of brown fur suddenly ran out in the road. The rabbit startled the mare enough that she reared back and pawed at the air with her forelegs. Set off balance, the phaeton tipped to the side. Albina heard the sickening sound of an axle breaking right before she closed her eyes and was thrown out of the vehicle.

Five



A lady must exercise proper dress...

Lady A's Advice Column

Albina landed on the ground with a hard thud, the impact temporarily knocking the wind out of her. By the time she'd gathered her wits, a loud crack of thunder shook the ground beneath her and a fat drop of rain splashed the tip of her now scuffed boot. She laid there for a moment, trying to decide if anything was broken, although her muscles screamed in so much protest that it was hard to tell.

She could definitely tell that she was getting older. When she was a child, a similar situation would see her jumping right back to her feet.

Now, as a wave of dizziness assailed her as she slowly rose to a seated position, she had to groan. No doubt her entire body would ache in the morning.

As the rain began to fall in earnest, Albina finally rose to her feet, but she stumbled when the heel of her boot snapped off. Unsteady, she reached out and grabbed the side of the phaeton, which was listing heavily to one side. Dripping wet, she shivered inside of her thin cloak, as a brisk, north wind

sent a chill up her spine. She would have worn something heavier, but then again, she hadn't known she was going to be stranded in the middle of a rainstorm.

Albina limped over to the horse, who was prancing in place rather anxiously. After patting her coat and speaking a few soothing words in the mare's ear, she slowly calmed enough where Albina could assess the damage to the vehicle. She winced, for the phaeton wasn't going anywhere for a while. Not only was the axle broken, but the back left wheel was stuck in a rut that was now several inches deep in mud.

I'll simply ride back. Albina set about trying to unhitch the mare from the broken carriage, but her fingers were so wet and numb that she only fumbled with the straps, getting them in an even more tangled shape than before.

She stood back and set her hands on her hips as the rain continued to lash out at her. *What now?* She certainly didn't want to leave the horse unattended, but neither did she care to spend the night on the road waiting for someone to happen to come by and assist her. Or rob her.

She shivered again, but this time it was for a different reason entirely.



MICHAEL WAS EXHAUSTED. NOT ONLY HAD THIS BEEN ONE OF the most trying days of his life, but he was riding back to Beasley Hall in the pouring rain.

It hadn't taken long for the roads to become a muddy mess, nor for his greatcoat to be drenched. At least his head was still dry. Thank God for a wide brimmed, tricorne hat. It

might not have been all the fashion anymore, but it served a good purpose, and he was grateful for it.

He kept imagining a cheery fire waiting for him when he returned home, and a nice, warming glass of brandy. Fortunately, trying days like these were few and far between. But then, when a man was doing all he could to save a drowning marriage, some sacrifices had to be made.

Michael rounded a bend in the road and had to squint his eyes against the lashing rain that tried to obscure his vision. Tucking his head down farther into his coat, he frowned as a dark shape began to take form ahead.

He was only about a mile from Beasley Hall, and to see another carriage wasn't much of a common occurrence. Most travelers stuck to the main road.

As he began to draw closer, he frowned, for it was evident that he was coming upon a wreckage. The black and yellow phaeton was clearly—

He blinked. Then blinked again.

That phaeton was *his*.

What the devil—?

And that was when he saw her. Dress torn, bonnet drooping rather pathetically, and huddled next to one of his horses, was his wife. He could tell she didn't recognize him at first, for her hazel eyes were wide and uncertain, trying to determine if he was a friend or foe.

He knew it wouldn't endear her to him, but he couldn't stop the laughter that bubbled up from his chest.

She stared at him as if he'd gone mad, until his identity became clear.

“Michael?”

He crossed his wrists over the pommel of his saddle, intending to enjoy this moment. Suddenly the rain didn't seem nearly as annoying.

“You seem to need some assistance, my lady.”

Albina folded her arms, irritated now that she knew he wasn't a highwayman. “What gave it away?” she returned sarcastically.

“You seem rather uncharitable for someone who could use some help,” he countered, although he slid off of his mount and walked over to her.

“Oh, just stop aggravating me and unhitch this animal so that I can get home and into some dry clothes before it gets dark and any manner of

CREATURE MIGHT COME OUT OF THOSE WOODS.” SHE INDICATED the thicket in question.

Michael smiled, although the idea of her calling Bealey Hall *home* once again hit him squarely in the chest. He knew it meant nothing, just a mere slip of the tongue, but it made him want to shout at the moon nonetheless.

Once he'd freed the mare from the broken phaeton, he held his hand out to Albina. She would have to ride bareback the rest of the way, but he had no doubts as to her ability to do so. She was an accomplished horsewoman and had been the one to teach their daughters, Mary and Sarah, how to ride.

But as for her driving abilities...

“If you don’t mind me asking, how *did* you manage to break my phaeton?”

That question earned him a glare, but she replied evenly, “A rabbit ran out into the road and scared the horse.”

“Ah.” He nodded.

“It could have happened to anyone,” she added primly.

“Indeed, it could have,” he agreed. She had obviously been waiting for him to argue her point, but when he didn’t, he could tell he had her at a loss for words.

“I’m relieved you’re unharmed.” He set his hands about her waist.

“Up you go.”

Without a sidesaddle, Albina was forced to sit astride. Unfortunately for Michael, this caused her dress to ride up to her calves, and he was faced with the creamy curve of her bare leg. How many countless times had those long limbs been wrapped around his waist?

He swallowed heavily and returned to his horse. His manhood was already swelling with the delights that he recalled so vividly. As he swung up into the saddle, he had to wince slightly.

Not until he was settled did he turn back to Albina, only to find that her hazel eyes were alight with a similar inner turmoil. Hope mixed with fear and caused him to say abruptly, “Are you ready?”

When she nodded, he urged his horse into motion, and prayed that his mount didn’t sense the tension in his body and toss him onto the ground.



ALBINA'S HEART WAS POUNDING. THAT HEADY SENSE OF desire had returned with a vengeance. Just that single glance from those fascinating chocolate eyes, and she was reduced to a puddle of nerves.

Perhaps hope was not lost after all.

When they pulled up into the Beasley Hall courtyard, the stable master came running toward them. "My lord. My lady! What happened?

Was there an accident?"

"We are well, Mr. Epperson, although I cannot say the same for my phaeton." Michael said as he dismounted.

"I will make immediate arrangements to have it retrieved, my lord."

"Thank you. You'll find it on the side of the road about a mile or so toward the village."

As Mr. Epperson ran off to the stables, Michael walked over to Albina to assist her down. Her fingers trembled as she set them on his strong shoulders, relishing the feel of those muscles rippling and bunching beneath her fingertips as she slid down to the ground.

She was still unsteady as he set her on her feet, her knees threatening to buckle, either from the scare of the earlier incident, or because of Michael's hands upon her waist she wasn't sure. But either way, he slid an arm around her legs, and lifted her into his arms. Two stable hands returned at that moment to lead the horses away as they went inside.

It had been years since Albina had been cradled against her husband's chest. And while she enjoyed the feel of the heat emanating from his body, his arms around her, she still had that niggling doubt in the back of her mind...



THE ENTIRE STAFF WAS IN A TIZZY WHEN MICHAEL CARRIED his wife over the threshold. They immediately thought something was wrong with their mistress. He assured them all with a curt explanation that things were fine, and ordered a warm bath for both of them. While he wouldn't have minded *sharing* a tub with Albina, for it would certainly be the quickest way for them to heat up, he refrained, carrying her to her chamber instead.

But as Michael sat Albina down, he was reluctant to let her go. Even though he was leaving a trail of water wherever he went, leaving a small puddle on the floor of her room, he wanted this moment to linger. Her clothes were plastered to her body, giving him a generous view of the curve of her breasts and the indentation at her waist.

BUT HE KNEW ALL OF THOSE HILLS AND VALLEYS OF HER BODY without even looking. He'd tasted her and caressed her to the point he knew her as well as he knew himself. That had never changed. Nor the fact that he still wanted her.

“Albina...”

He could tell when her mood shifted, changed. Instantly, that wall was right back up between them. “Where did you go

today?”

He clenched his jaw. “I had something to take care of.” He knew it was vague and it wasn’t a good enough answer for her, for he saw her visibly retreat even further back into that shell of distrust and uncertainty.

“I see.” She turned her back on him, and it was all he could do to resist the urge to shake her, to make her believe she never had anything to worry about when it came to his devotion to her. But why should she trust him when she didn’t even trust herself enough to know that he had never stopped loving her?

When Helen arrived to assist her mistress, it gave her the perfect opportunity to dismiss him. “I should get out of these wet clothes before I catch a chill.”

“I suppose I should do the same,” he said stoically. “I’m sure you would be distraught if I came down with a fever, and I shouldn’t wish to upset you if that should occur.”

With that, he turned on his heel and left, nearly slamming the door behind him.



ALBINA SAT IN THE TUB UNTIL THE WATER COOLED TO THE point she would start shivering again if she remained. She reluctantly got out and pulled on the robe that Helen had left for her. She’d dismissed her maid earlier, not wanting to have an audience to witness her tears.

Strangely enough, though, she didn’t shed a single one, although she was sure that they would have fallen the moment

the servant left.

Albina didn't even know why she was so emotional lately, unless it was the fact she hadn't been back at Beaufrey Hall for a full week, and yet, her thoughts about Michael were more twisted and confusing than they had been before she'd left London.

She sat near the fire with a sigh, tucking her legs beneath her like when she was younger, and whenever something had been troubling her. It wasn't as if the pose made her figure things out any easier, but curling her body together made her feel safe, protected.

OF COURSE, SHE'D NEVER HAD TO WORRY ABOUT SECURITY, either in London or at Beaufrey Hall, because Michael had always given her a generous allowance. And since she never wasted it on extreme frivolities or at the gaming tables, she was able to live quite comfortably at Baine House.

While she might attend a ball or two now and again, most of her time was spent writing.

But it was these unsettling musings that made her wonder what Michael did in his spare time. She knew that he looked after his tenants and his estate, but what about the rest of the time? Or like today, when he'd left on a rather secretive errand?

It bothered her to imagine that he did, indeed, have a mistress tucked away somewhere. And since he wasn't all that forthcoming about where he'd been, it was only natural that she might arrive at the wrong conclusions.

Then, of course, there was that snide comment he'd made on the way out the door, as if he would cause her further problems should he become sick.

She put a hand to her aching head.

Tonight it would probably be best if she just took a dinner tray in her room.

She wasn't sure she would be good company otherwise.



MICHAEL HESITATED AT ALBINA'S BEDCHAMBER DOOR, HIS hand poised to knock.

He didn't like how they'd left things earlier. He'd lashed out because of his anger, the same way she had when she'd seen the conservatory. The last thing he wanted was for them to be at even bigger odds.

He would even tell her the truth about where he'd been today if that would cease this awful disquiet continuing to run between them. It just seemed as if the turmoil was never ending. They were running in the same circles.

How did one repair something when it continued to break apart?

Slowly, he let his hand fall back to his side.

Michael stared at the hard oak separating him from his wife, as if willing her to open it on the other side. Unfortunately, it remained stubbornly closed.

He shoved a hand through his hair. He knew that sometimes the best thing he could do was leave a hornet's nest

alone, rather than kick it and

RISK GETTING STUNG. SO, IF ALBINA WANTED TO TALK, HE decided it was best to be patient and let her come to him.

It was all he'd done for the past five years.

He'd waited. And prayed. And waited some more.

He was starting to get tired of *waiting*. He wanted to burst down the door and have it all out in the open, but the only thing that kept him from acting on the impulse was the fear that he would frighten her off to the point where she would be lost to him forever. At least this way, he still held on to that thin thread of hope — the *chance* — that love could return.

It might continue to tear him up from the inside out, he might rant and rave and curse at the unfairness of it all, to be denied the one true thing he wanted in this life, but if that's what it took, if he even had to lose his sanity in the process, he would do it.

For her.

Turning on his heel, he clenched his fists and walked away.

Six



A lady must never whine...

Lady A's Advice Column

Albina was about to lose her mind, she was so bored.

Ironically enough, she had been the one to get ill from her excursion in the rain, so she'd spent the last few days stuck in bed. She could just imagine how her poor nose appeared considering the amount of handkerchiefs she had gone through.

Albina remembered that when her son Connor would get a sore throat, the world must surely be ending, he would complain so, but now she had to admit that it was pretty miserable. She was tired of coughing, of Mrs. Dryler only sending up tea, chicken broth, and bread for her to eat, and irritated because Michael only came by to visit her at short intervals, claiming "you need your rest."

If she needed any more "rest" at this point, she feared she'd be dead and buried.

She didn't even bother to stifle a groan when Helen arrived with her dinner tray. "I swear I shall throw it across the room

if it is another bowl of soup.”

Helen’s eyes widened slightly; not used to her mistress sounding so severe. “Not to worry, my lady. Mrs. Dryler said that you deserved a treat for being such a good patient.”

The maid set the tray on the bedside table and lifted the lid to reveal the scents of heaven. “Ah. That is better.” Albina greedily took in the smell of roasted pork, steamed vegetables, Yorkshire pudding, and even a strawberry tart. “Finally, a proper meal.”

Helen set the tray on her mistress’ lap, and Albina began to attack the meal with gusto. At this point, she didn’t care if she took small bites and portrayed the actions of a proper lady. She was hungry and it was delicious.

“I’ll come back later for the tray, my lady. And I’ll give your compliments to Mrs. Dryler.” The maid grinned before she quit the room, leaving Albina to her feast.

Every single morsel was gone, and she finally sat back with a contented sigh. She was still sipping on her tea when there was a brief knock at her door. Thinking that it was Helen returning for the tray, she bade her enter, only to find out it was Chael instead.

HE EYED HER PLATE AND LIFTED A DARK BROW. “I HEARD YOU were grateful for something else to eat.” He took the tray and set it back on the bedside table, before sitting on the edge of the bed.

“I didn’t know I was going to have to suffer from being sick *and* starved to death.” She sniffed, and not because she was just trying to make a point.

He chuckled as she grabbed her handkerchief and wiped her nose.

“It’s not funny!” She crossed her arms, even as her lips twitched in spite of herself.

He shook his head. “Do you remember when Connor used to get a sore throat? One would think that Nostradamus was right and the world was ending.”

Albina’s chest seized at his words that so perfectly echoed her thoughts from moments before. “He was rather crabby, to be sure.”

His brown eyes held a hint of mirth when he looked at her. “And now we know where he gets it from.”

Albina’s mouth fell open. Could it be that he was actually *teasing* her? It made her heart beat with renewed vigor. “If that is true, then I would have to say that Mary and Sarah got their stubborn natures from their father.”

Michael’s eyes crinkled at the corners. “If you weren’t so ill, I might just have to call you out for that slur on my honor.”

“It’s not a ‘slur’ if it’s the truth,” she countered, earning her another rich laugh. She shrugged, adding, “At least Connor got your dark hair. Can you imagine how much he would detest me if he’d inherited my red?” She shook her unbound hair now, just imagining the battle that would have ensued should that have been a reality.

But when she felt a slight tug on one of the strands, she paused and looked down where Chael was rubbing a section of her hair between his thumb and forefinger. His eyes were fixated on the spot, as if the sight had nearly hypnotized him. “I was always fascinated with the color,” he murmured, almost

to himself. “Not quite the color of fire, but more of a burnished copper.”

Albina held her breath, her gaze riveted on Chael. When he finally glanced up, their eyes met. It was as if time stood still. His focus dropped to her mouth and she stopped breathing entirely. They were so close that if both of them just leaned in a little bit closer...

He shook his head and rose to his feet. “I should go.” With one last, lingering glance at her, he left.



THE NEXT MORNING A MIRACLE OCCURRED. ALBINA AWOKE with a clear head, so she intended to make up for all the time she'd laid around like a slugabed.

Including a newly evolved plan to seduce her husband.

If that near kiss the night before had been any indication, it was apparent that he was still attracted to her, so she intended to use that to her advantage. While she still held that niggling doubt about his mysterious errand, she decided to push it out of her mind. She told herself there was a perfectly rational explanation, for surely if there was another woman, he wouldn't look at *her* with such passion. She wasn't so old that she hadn't imagined that look of raw lust in her husband's eyes.

But what if I was wrong and he rejects me? her inner voice chided.

Then that's the choice you have to ask yourself if you're willing to take. But isn't he worth the effort?

Yes, he was.

With a small smile playing about her lips, she intended to start by making the most of this beautiful, new day.

The dark blue day dress that donned accented the red in her hair, and she smiled in anticipation as she went downstairs in search of Michael.

She found him in his study with his spectacles on, hunched over an estate ledger. He glanced up when she walked in, his gaze lingering on her before he frowned and returned to his work. “Good morning, Albina.”

“It is a lovely one, is it not?” she returned, sashaying over to the window. “I thought about taking a walk while the dew is still fresh on the grass.” She looked over her shoulder at him. As she’d suspected, he was watching her intently. “I don’t suppose you’d care to accompany me?”

He removed his glasses and sat back in his chair. “Are you sure that’s a good idea after you’ve been sick? You might contract another chill.”

She rolled her eyes dramatically. “Really, Michael. I’m younger than you. I have survived far worse ailments, I assure you, including birthing three children.”

She couldn’t be sure, but it almost seemed as though a light touch of color appeared on his cheeks. Surely he wasn’t actually... *blushing?*

He cleared his throat. “Yes, well, you make a valid point.” He rose to his feet. “In that case, I’ll be glad to join you.”

Albina grinned, and after they collected their outerwear, along with his cane and her bonnet, he offered her his arm as they walked outside.

THEY STOOD ON THE FRONT STEP, AND SHE BREATHED DEEPLY of the fresh, summer air, still cool at this time of the morning, although the promise of warmth was there. “I forgot how... *clean* everything smells here. London is so polluted and covered with soot and smoke that even should I wish to take a walk in the park, it is crowded and carries a continuous, gloomy fog.”

“Indeed,” Michael said as they began a trek down the drive. “I find that my lungs aren’t as congested as they were.”

She glanced at him curiously. “I never knew that you suffered from such an affliction.”

He swung his cane at a tall tuft of grass. “I didn’t wish to bother you with unnecessary matters.”

She frowned then. “Your health is not inconsequential to me.”

“I didn’t mean to imply that it was, only that I didn’t want to burden you with my problems when you were dealing with your own.” He paused. “If you will recall, it was a rather difficult time after your parents died and the children left home.”

She digested his words, knowing that they were true. “Yes, I agree I didn’t feel like myself for some time.” She glanced down at the path at her feet. “Some days I still don’t.”

They were silent for a moment before he asked, “How has your writing been going?”

She grimaced. “Not at all, I’m afraid.” She sighed heavily. “I just don’t have any more advice to give.”

“I doubt that’s true,” he countered softly. “You’ve always been intelligent. I’m sure the words will come to you eventually.”

Albina’s lips twitched. “My mother would be horrified to hear you speak in such a manner. She always said that no man ever wished to marry a smart woman.”

“Then I would have to tell her that she is mistaken, for that is one of the things that made me fall in love with you.”

She looked sharply at Michael, although he stared straight ahead, his face wiped clear of any expression. “Was it?” she dared to ask.

This time, she saw the slight movement of his lips. “Among other things.”

“Like what?” she prodded. Now her curiosity had been flamed.

He pondered her question for a moment and then said, “You were beautiful, of course. And kind and good natured.” He shifted a sideways glance at her. “And you made me laugh. Not many women could do that.”

ALBINA’S MOUTH FELL OPEN. “THAT’S WHAT I LOVED ABOUT you, your ability to make me smile!”

Suddenly, his brows came down in a frown. “I fear I’ve lost that particular talent over the years.”

Albina shrugged and hugged his arm. “Oh, I don’t know. I’m rather content today.”

He stopped and turned to her. His brown eyes were searching as they rested on her face. “Are you? Truly?”

“Yes,” she answered honestly.

She saw his throat work, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down, as if he were trying to conceal some deeper, thicker emotion. “I’m glad to hear it.”

He bent down and likely intended to give her a slight peck on the lips, a gesture of his own complacency, but the moment his mouth touched hers; her eyes slid shut with the promise of something more. She waited a heartbeat of time and then nearly rejoiced when his lips began to move.

She slid her hands up his chest and grasped the lapels of his greatcoat, urging him to continue, perhaps never to stop.

It had been so long since she’d had such intimate human contact that she craved it as much as someone wandering in the desert craved water.

She feared he might pull away when he tensed as if he might do so, but then his arms came around her and he pressed her against his body.

She sighed, for she loved it when he held her.

He seemed to take that as encouragement to deepen the embrace, running the tip of his tongue against the seam of her lips. She opened to him, and her heart fluttered at the sound of his groan. The kiss grew and flourished like a flower exposed to the sun.

Albina clutched him as if he were the only thing keeping her on this earth, afraid that if she let go that this moment would disappear as well.

She had loved this man since the moment he bowed before her at her debut ball, and she knew that she would love him for the rest of her life.

She hadn't been brought up to believe in fairy tales, or that there was a soul mate out there for everyone. It was only because of Chael that she'd dreamed of the promise of happily ever after. Because of his love, he had made her believe.

He pulled away from her and she nearly cried out at the loss. "I should get back to work." He started to turn away.

"Michael, wait..."

He paused, but didn't fully face her. "Yes?"

I love you. "I'll... see you at dinner?"

HE NODDED CURTLY.

She watched him depart, but it wasn't with sadness, but joy. At long last, they had finally shared a kiss, a heart-stopping embrace that made her want to hug herself.

But tonight...

Tonight she intended for it all to come together.

And she knew just what dress to wear.

Seven



A lady must always observe the proprieties...

Lady A's Advice Column

Albina had sent down word that she would be a little late to dine that evening, so Michael had asked Mrs. Dryler to hold the meal a bit longer, although he decided to partake of some port at the table while he waited for his wife to appear.

It had taken him all afternoon to put some rather lascivious thoughts of Albina out of his mind, but he felt confident that he was in firm control of his emotions, enough so that he might make it through dinner without making a fool of himself and pouncing on her like some sort of lecherous lad who had seen his first woman.

He was calm and collected as he lifted his wineglass to his lips.

But as Albina entered, he was forced to lower it back to the table, as his hand started shaking.

Was she trying to send him to an early grave?

He nearly groaned aloud as she strode into the room in a dress that could only have been designed with Cyprian in

mind., The gown had a high waist that pushed her full breasts up with an enticing view of the valley between them. Short puffed sleeves hugged her shoulders, and without the hindrance of gloves, he had a generous view of the bare flesh of her arms. But it was the color — a bold, daring red — that had him gaping at her like a fish out of water.

Have I paid for such a scandalous gown? But more importantly...

Did she wear that around London?

Neither was a very settling thought as his grip tightened on the stem of his wineglass. When a nearby footman strode forward to seat his wife, a little too eagerly in Michael's opinion, he glared at him outright, causing the servant to scurry back to his position.

His wife turned to face him then; her eyes alight with what could only be considered concealed mischief. A slight curve played about the corners of her mouth, as if they shared a mutual secret. A ruby necklace and earbobs graced her smooth, creamy skin, and he recognized them as the set he'd gifted to her on their betrothal. They were part of the Beasley family jewels. When she turned her head, the gems sparkled in the candlelight, and caught the red highlights in her hair. She was fascinating, and absolutely breathtaking and — all *his*.

“...don't you agree, my lord?”

MICHAEL BLINKED, ONLY THEN REALIZING THAT SHE'D BEEN speaking. He cleared his throat. *So much for being in control*, he thought dryly. She walked in the room dressed as a courtesan and he lost all common sense, including his ability to hear.

“Pardon?”

Her lips twitched. “I said that the lobster bisque is rather good tonight.

Don’t you agree?”

“Indeed,” Michael said. He glanced down at the table where the steaming, creamy soup was waiting for him. He hadn’t even realized they had been served until that point, his focus had been entirely set upon his wife. “It smells delicious.”

He forced himself to pick up his spoon, but when he would have brought the first bite to his lips, she moaned in a manner that could only be pure pleasure. But it wasn’t until her enticing pink tongue slid out to lick her lips that Michael’s throat went dry and a trail of fire shot straight to his groin.

He sat his spoon down on his plate with a clatter and reached for his port, taking a long, bracing drink that drained the liquid inside. Instantly, a footman was there to refill it. As he took another healthy swallow, he saw Albina frown at him in concern.

“Is everything alright?” she asked.

No, everything is far from bloody alright. “Of course. Why do you ask?” he gritted out.

She gave a dainty shrug. “You just seem... distracted. As if something is troubling you.”

The only thing that’s troubling me is the question of whether I should order everyone out of this room and bend you over this table or drag you upstairs and... Michael released a swift breath and clenched his fists on the table. “I suppose I’m just tired.”

Again, there was that adorable crease between her brows. “Well, that is regrettable. I was hoping that after dinner we might retire to the parlor and play a game of chess. It’s been awhile since I’ve been faced with such a challenging opponent.”

“Fine.” She glanced over at his harsh tone, so he softened it slightly.

“I’m sure I can manage to stay awake for one game, if that’s what you wish.”

“Splendid.” She nearly beamed, making her look like the youthful girl he’d first courted. This time, an ache of a different sort hit him — straight in the chest, but it was enough of a firm reminder to get him through the rest of the meal.

A SINGLE GAME OF CHESS DOES NOT A MARRIAGE MAKE.



ALBINA WAS PLEASED, FOR IT SEEMED AS IF HER PLAN WAS working. He had truly appeared rather discombobulated upon her arrival. Unfortunately, she’d somehow lost his interest along the way, but she intended to bring that fire back to his gaze soon enough.

“Do you have a color preference?” she asked him when they were seated across from each other, the silver and gold chessboard between them.

“No.” He drummed his fingers on the table. “I confess I haven’t had much time to play either.”

She smiled. “Good. Then I might actually have a chance. As hard as I might try, I could never best you at chess.” She selected the silver army, and then glanced at him expectantly.

“Ladies first.”

“Very well.” She considered her options for a moment, and then moved a pawn forward.

He did the same.

For a time, neither of them spoke, merely concentrated on the game at hand. But then, as the minutes passed and the play grew more demanding, Albina found herself deeply in thought. She absently stroked her bishop as she considered her next move, before changing her mind and moving to the rook.

She glanced up momentarily to see if Michael was getting irritated with how long it was taking her to make a decision. But while he had leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms in similar contemplation, it was the glow in those brown eyes that caught her attention. He wasn't watching the pieces on the board so much as what she was *doing* to them.

His jaw was clenched at the slow movement of her fingers as she ran them up and down that miniature castle.

Inwardly, her smile widened, but she was careful to keep her face expressionless. She returned to the bishop, moving it into place and leaned back to wait for Michael's play, but this time, instead of considering what move to make next, she concentrated on another game entirely.

Trying to be as innocuous as possible, she reached up and toyed with the single long curl that she'd instructed Helen to leave hanging down from the rest of her chignon. She brought it over her shoulder and let it rest between the hollow of her breasts without taking her eyes from the

BOARD. SHE WAS REWARDED WHEN MICHAEL'S HAND abruptly jerked, sending three of his pieces scattering across the board. He uttered a curse under his breath as he righted the knight and two pawns that had been taken down.

"Sorry," he muttered, as he shoved a piece into place and sat back.

The next few moves went about the same. While Albina had never known Michael to be so reckless in his strategy when playing chess, she could tell that his mind was anywhere but on the game this evening, as more than one of his moves ended with her capturing several of his pieces, until finally, there was a sad lack of gold upon the board.

But it wasn't until she slid her queen into place and said rather victoriously, "Checkmate," that she realized she'd accomplished what she'd never been able to do before. She'd bested him at chess. "I truly thought this day would never come," she preened.

"Yes, well." He shifted in his chair. "I said I was a bit out of practice."

"To my everlasting advantage." She grinned proudly.

He snorted. "You don't have to look quite so pleased with yourself."

"Why not?" she lifted one shoulder in an elegant shrug. "It's not often I get to claim such a victory over you."

"Indeed." His eyes flashed as he rose to his feet. He offered her a light bow. "If you will excuse me, I believe I shall retire so that I might lick my wounds in the privacy of my chamber."

She instantly felt her smile falter. “Of course.”

“Albina?”

“Yes?” she prompted softly.

She glanced up to see Michael carefully observing her. His gaze swept over her seated form, lingering momentarily on the swell of her breasts “Is everything alright?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t it be?”

His lids lowered slightly. “You just seem... upset.”

She glanced down at her clasped hands in her lap, feeling rather deflated that she had failed so miserably in a seduction attempt that had seemed to be going so well. One would think that after being with the same man for nearly twenty-five years, twenty of which were spent together, she might feel a bit more comfortable in his company, that she might have the courage to tell him what she wanted. But while she might do her best to entice Michael back into her life, she wasn’t so bold as to come right out and ask him to love her again.

SO SHE DID THE ONLY THING THAT SHE COULD, EVEN THOUGH it nearly tore her heart out of her chest to send him on his way. “I’m perfectly fine. Good night, Chael.”

Restless, Albina stood and walked over to the window, to look out at the darkness beyond. She could see her reflection in the glass from the light that flickered behind her, and wondered what was wrong with that woman staring back at her, the one who hadn’t been able to entice her husband to remain.

But while she thought Michael had left the room, she gasped when she saw his towering form come into view

behind her. He reached out a hand and gently touched the side of her neck with the backs of his fingers, causing her body to fly into immediate chaos. Her heart pounded, her knees grew weak, and there was an insistent throbbing between her legs that yearned to be satisfied. His hand slowly moved down her arm, and her eyes slid closed.

“You called me Chael just now.”

Albina’s stomach quivered, as she slowly opened her eyes. She had always thought of him as Chael, had even referred to him as such to her friend Lydia, but she hadn’t called him that in person in years. It had seemed too... intimate when their relationship had been on rough ground.

“Why shouldn’t I call you that?” she said quietly. “It’s your name.”

“No,” he returned softly, his hand trailing back up the side of her ribcage. “Michael is my name. *Chael* is the nickname you gave me when we were courting.” He leaned his head down to whisper near her ear. “It sounds so good to hear you say it again. But I have to wonder why now?”

“I don’t...” She stumbled over her words when his thumb brushed the underside of her breast. “...know what you mean.”

“Don’t you, my sweet Alby?” He nearly purred, speaking his own nickname for her. “Because I think you do. I think this entire evening was meant to entice me back to your bed.” She nearly moaned as his other hand joined the first, both of them just inches from cupping her breasts.

“What is it you want from me, Alby?”

After five long years of waiting and yearning, she finally dared to say,

“Touch me.”

He replied by slowly moving his hands over her breasts, kneading them gently through her gown. “Anything else?” he whispered near her ear, his breath hot and enticing.

She watched in the glass as he pleased her, the sight of those large, muscular hands upon her body causing more words to spill forth. “Make love to me, Chael.”

AT THAT, HE GENTLY TURNED HER TO FACE HIM. “AS MY LADY commands.”

His mouth descended upon hers, and Albina thought for sure she would lose the ability to stand. She had denied herself of his pleasure for so long, *too* long. So many nights she’d yearned for these same arms around her, this same mouth on hers. Now that it was happening, she wasn’t sure what to do, or how to react. It had always been a fantasy on those nights she’d been alone, when books had been the only happiness that filled that hollow void inside of her. At least in between the pages of someone else’s story, she might forget what she’d lost for a brief time.

He pulled away only long enough to extend a hand to her. His eyes sparkled, as tempting as warm chocolate. The slight lines around his mouth, as well as the silver at his temples only added to his appeal. “Come upstairs with me,” he whispered.

Albina placed her hand in his, those warm fingers enveloping her like a caress. Now that Chael had been returned to her, she was going to hold on to his affection for as long as it dared to remain. Once they reignited the spark of the bedchamber, surely the rest would fall into place.

Eight



A lady must submit to her husband in the marriage bed...

Lady A's Advice Column

Albina wanted to rip the buttons right off of her husband's waistcoat the moment they entered his bedchamber and locked the door. Her heart was pounding; she had never been so impatient to be with him as she was at that moment.

"You're rather enthusiastic, my lady. I don't know whether to feel flattered, or a little bit scared."

Albina smiled, for she could hear the amusement in her husband's voice. "You haven't seen *enthusiasm* yet, my lord," she said, right before she acted on her impulse and brazenly sent buttons scattering all over the hardwood floor.

They were still pinging, rolling under furniture, when he said, "Oh, dear. I fear my valet will be rather cross with you."

"Then I'm afraid he's really going to be mad about this..." With that, she split his silk waistcoat down the back, rending it entirely in two. It fell away from his white, cambric shirt in two discarded flutters.

He glanced down at the ruined material at his feet, and then turned to her with heat in his gaze hot enough to singe. “He may never forgive you.”

Looking her up and down, he reached out and gently ran a finger along her neckline, the tip of it brushing the tops of her aching breasts.

With a grin that held the promise of pure wickedness, he said, “My turn.”

Spinning her away from him, he started to slowly unlace her gown.

He kissed the side of her neck. “I should hate to tear such a lovely gown...” She shivered at his words, as her dress fell to the floor in a whisper of silk. But when he bent down and removed a knife from inside his boot, she couldn’t hold back a gasp. With one smooth cut, her stays dropped from her body.

“Now that contraption, on the other hand, I could always do without.”

The knife clattered to the floor on the other side of the room.

Albina was still clad in her thin, cotton chemise and stockings, her slippers on her feet, when Michael turned her back to face him. He ran his hands up the inside of her body, quickly divesting her of her chemise. His nostrils flared as he tossed the thin cotton aside and looked at her bare body. “Much better.”

FEELING A SENSE OF FEMININE EMPOWERMENT, SHE GRASPED his shirt and pulled it out of his trousers. “And yet, you’re still entirely overdressed, my lord.”

He cocked his mouth in a smirk, but obediently lifted his arms.

She admired the ripple of muscle that ran across his abdomen and along his biceps. She'd always loved the patch of hair in the middle of his chest that ran across his stomach before dipping below the band of his trousers. There wasn't too much to be displeasing, but enough where she could run her fingers through the mass.

She glanced down and noted the sizable bulge in the front of his trousers, and dared to reach down and run her fingernails lightly over the material. He leaned his head back with a light groan of pleasure, his Adam's apple evident in the thick column of his throat.

She couldn't resist the siren's pull to lean forward and place a hot kiss on the side of his neck, where his pulse beat strongly with his desire.

“Alby...”

She answered his plea by slowly unbuttoning the front of his trousers.

When they fell to the floor, she licked her lips at the sight of the urgent, pulsing manhood that was jutting out from his body, proudly erect. She fell to her knees and took him in her mouth, savoring the taste of him. She wasn't sure who groaned as she began a steady rhythm that soon had him pulling away from her.

“Any more of that and I will lose what tenuous control I have, my lady,” he growled. He grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her to her feet. He led her to the bed and sat her on the edge, gently pushing her backward. His eyes gleamed wickedly as he said once more, “*My turn.*”

Albina clenched the bed covers on either side of her, her hips lifting at the first swipe of his tongue across her womanhood. “Chael...” she sighed, and she heard a mumbled rumble in his chest in pleased awareness. Instantly, his pace quickened until her legs were shaking with need. “Oh, God. Yes...” She was panting, begging incoherently, until finally he grabbed her hips and she came apart, the pleasure washing over her like the sea at high tide.

Chael crawled up her body, but instead of entering her, he lay down on his back beside her and pulled her on top of him. She sat up with one leg bent on either side of him, as he guided himself to her entrance. She gasped at the sheer bliss of feeling inch after glorious inch pushing inside of her. She was panting in earnest again, and she hadn’t even started to move.

“RIDE ME, ALBY.” IT WAS A GROWL, A COMMAND, BUT ONE she didn’t mind obeying in the least.

Her eyes rolled back in her head as she began a continuous rhythm that soon had them both drenched in perspiration. He squeezed her breasts, taunting and tormenting, until she opened her eyes. She watched as his pleasure became intense to the point of pain. With a sharp intake of breath, he threw his head back and then spilled his release with a long groan of ecstasy. The sight was so erotic that it instantly sent Albina into her own wave of bliss, and for the second time, she burst apart on a floating cloud of desire.

She collapsed on the bed beside Chael, a contented and disheveled mess.

She had never felt so glorious. It was as if she was truly reborn. And she knew that only in Chael’s arms could she feel

such amazing completion.



MICHAEL STARED AT THE CANOPY ABOVE HIS BED AS IF HE'D never seen it before. Odd that something he'd always taken for granted suddenly had new meaning. But Albina had done that. She'd breathed life back into him when he hadn't even known that he was dying. His health had never been a problem. It was his soul that had been wasting away.

With her beside him, he was whole once again.

A burst of energy hit him in the chest, and he wanted to laugh, to go outside and howl at the moon. If nothing else could prove that Albina wanted things to work out between them, he knew tonight had been a rather good indication of how she felt. She wouldn't have taken him to bed unless she'd *wanted* him to be there.

"You seem happy for some reason."

He glanced down to see Albina gazing up at him as if he was her hero. To share with her every night what had just transpired, he would be that and more if she'd only stay with him and not go back to London.

But that was a topic left for another time. He didn't want to rush her and ruin what little they had gained.

"I can't imagine why," he teased.

She rolled her eyes and moved slightly, her gorgeous breasts suddenly bared for his viewing enjoyment. In such a good mood, he couldn't resist turning and pinning her to the

bed. She gasped, but her eyes told him that she wasn't resistant to his advances.

HE LOOKED DOWN AT THE ROSY PEAKS OF HER NIPPLES AND bent his head to take a gentle nibble. Her breasts quivered as she gave a sharp inhale.

“Chael...”

God, he would *never* tire of hearing his name on her lips, especially when she was in the throes of passion. He rewarded her by licking the delicate peak with his tongue, before taking it into his mouth and suckling.

Her hips instantly lifted, a clear indication of what she wanted. If the throbbing between his own legs was any sign, he was also ready for the second round.

He grasped his cock, centering himself at her entrance. “Look at me, Alby.”

Her hazel eyes lifted slightly, but it was enough. He thrust into her in one smooth flex of his hips. She reached up and wrapped her arms around his shoulders and urged him down to her mouth. He went willingly, kissing and teasing her until they were once again on the brink.

And when they convulsed together again, the moment was so complete and fulfilling that Chael pulled Albina into the crook of his arm in the aftermath, and soon fell asleep with her nestled against his chest.



ALBINA STRETCHED IN THE MORNING SUNLIGHT THAT streamed in through the window. Muscles that she hadn't used in quite some time ached, but she merely grinned at the pain. She reached out her arm, but her husband's side of the bed was empty. She had to admit she was slightly disappointed, but she would just get dressed and go seek him out. In truth, she was almost giddy with the thought.

It was rather ironic, for considering how she had felt when she'd arrived at Bealey Hall more than a week ago, she hadn't been sure how her homecoming would turn out, if she and Chael would even be able to remain in the same room without a terrible awkward silence between them. That first night certainly hadn't gone well.

Now, she could only admit that her pleasant mood was because of him. After such a sizzling night together, she began to think that perhaps their marriage wasn't doomed after all. A grin quickly spread across her face, for she realized she hadn't felt so young and carefree in years. It was as if the excitement, that spark of new love was slowly returning. And she couldn't be happier.

SHE RETURNED TO HER CHAMBER AND RANG FOR HELEN, asking her to prepare a bath and requesting a bit of extra lavender to be added to the water.

Under the circumstances, she wanted to splurge a bit.

Afterward, Albina donned a yellow muslin. With a cheery smile on her face, and a decided spring to her step, she headed downstairs. Once she greeted Chael, she intended to speak with Mrs. Humphrey and ask what she could do to assist with the arrangements for St. John's Eve. She was the mistress of

this estate, after all. With less than two weeks to go, she didn't intend to spend her days twirling her thumbs.

Although she had a good idea how she planned on spending her *nights*...

Of course, as her grin grew, the inspiration she needed to write was surely not far away. She was certainly feeling motivated this morning.

The sound of an angry male voice met her ears, and Albina paused in the middle of the stairs, her hand clutching the banister. The study door was slightly ajar, so she could hear enough to discern that the irritated growl belonged to Michael, but the other one she couldn't quite place.

"...sent to Petranella at once."

Petranella?

Albina tightened her grip on the railing until her knuckles turned white, as a snippet of her husband's clipped conversation drifted to her ears.

She hesitated, thinking that she should just continue on her way, to leave him with his guest, but instead, she crept closer to the open door.

Her mother, if she were still alive, would be horrified to think that she was eavesdropping. "*Nothing good ever came from it,*" she would warn. And yet, Albina couldn't tear herself away.

"Yes, my lord," came the meek reply.

"Make sure that you wait for a reply. And for the love of God bring any further correspondence to the *back* door." Albina winced at the furious tone in Michael's voice. In all the years she'd known him, it wasn't often that he got that angry.

Whatever had happened, he wasn't pleased. More than likely it was something to do with one of the tenants.

She started to back away from the door, feeling like an intruder, when his next words stopped her in her tracks.

"It's imperative that my wife doesn't find out about any of this, do you understand?"

Albina felt her heart drop into her stomach. She began to hear a terrible buzzing inside of her head, and was instantly nauseous. She didn't wait to hear any more of their conversation.

AT THIS POINT, SHE'D HEARD QUITE ENOUGH.

She spun away from the door, but instead of going to seek out the housekeeper, she rushed back up the stairs to her chamber.

She slammed the door shut behind her and leaned heavily against it.

Her entire body was shaking, her lungs expanding to the point of pain, but nothing mattered but those final condemning words that came from her husband's own lips.

Her mother had been right. Nothing good ever came from eavesdropping; for there was only one explanation that made sense, why Michael might be corresponding with another woman while requesting that it remain absolutely secret from her.

He has a mistress.

Tears stung the back of her eyelids, but she refused to let them fall.

She also had to fight the urge to pack her things and return to London posthaste. She would *not* be a coward and run away in shame. After all, *she* wasn't the one who had done anything wrong. Granted, it might be difficult to look Michael in the eye after knowing the truth, and any hope that they might make amends had come crashing down, but she *would* be strong. She had planned to stay until the St. John's Eve celebration, and that's what she would do. But once it was over, she would return to London.

And that's where she would stay.

Nine



A lady must never make a hasty judgment...

Lady A's Advice Column

Michael stood in the doorway of the ballroom, arms crossed, leaning against the frame, as he watched his wife and Mrs. Humphrey discuss what decorations would be needed for the St. John's Eve celebration.

Albina's entire body was animated, her face set and focused on her task, as her hands moved about.

He had to snort. She never had been able to talk without using her entire body to express what she was saying.

He was impressed with how much devotion she was putting into making this year's party a success. For the past week, she had spoken with all of the staff and had instantly thrown herself in the preparations. He could tell that Mrs. Humphrey was glad to share the burden of planning, and while he didn't want to tell himself that Albina's eagerness to assist had anything to do with the fact it would be their twenty-fifth anniversary, he couldn't help but believe this would be the year everything would change for the better.

He suddenly frowned. However, now that he came to think of it, she had declined *every* offer he'd made in the past seven days. Whether it was to offer another trip to the village, or take a ride together in the afternoon, or to even let him teach her how to properly drive the newly repaired phaeton, her answer was always the same. Even though things between them had become a stalemate, she claimed she was exhausted from so much work. True, she'd been ill before throwing herself into the plans for St. John's Eve, so he hadn't pressed the issue.

But now he had to wonder if there was an underlying reason for her reticence to be alone with him. Not only was she silent, speaking very little during the times she *did* join him for meals, but she hadn't pursued any more conjugal visits either. After that one, amazing night, he'd thought things had vastly improved, that the chasm had closed considerably between them.

So what had changed?

Perhaps it was time he found out.

He walked forward and approached the two women. Mrs. Humphrey greeted him with a warm smile, but Albina's eyes were as frosty as a winter windowpane. He frowned. Now he *knew* he wasn't just being paranoid.

SOMETHING HAD DEFINITELY HAPPENED. *WHAT THE HELL DID I do?*

"Alby, can I speak with you a moment?"

She visibly stiffened at the sound of her nickname. "I'm rather busy, my lord. St. John's Eve is only a few days away."

"I'm aware of that," he returned evenly. "I'll keep it brief."

Michael could tell she was going to deny him again, but salvation came in the form of his housekeeper. “It’s fine, my lady. We can resume later this afternoon. I have a few things I can see to while you and Lord Beaufort chat.”

As she took her leave, Albina clasped her hands before her and waited for him to speak.

Michael wanted to run his hand through his hair in frustration. She wasn’t going to make this easy for him. She was as uptight as the governess he’d had as a child.

“Let’s retire to the library and have a drink.” *I know I can use one.*

He wanted to look behind him to see if his wife followed, but he could feel her presence in the room as surely as if a thundercloud had just rolled in off of the ocean. He poured himself a brandy and glanced at her.

“Would you care for something?”

“No, thank you.” She stood by the door as if prepared to bolt at any moment.

Just in case she acted on the impulse, he said, “Shut the door, please.”

He thought he heard her sigh, but she did as he asked. He gestured to the settee. “Have a seat.”

She sat, her back ramrod straight, her hands clasped tightly in her lap.

Damn. He walked over to the mantel and leaned against the marble, his glass dangling from his fingertips. He watched her for a time, and she met his gaze unflinchingly. Without any clue as to what might have gotten under her skin, he decided it would be best to address the issue directly.

“Have I done something to offend you?” he asked bluntly.

If possible, she stiffened even further. “Why would you say that?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he scoffed, taking a deep swallow of his brandy.

“Maybe it’s because ever since that single glorious night you’ve acted as though I don’t exist.”

“Have I?”

He wasn’t about to believe that innocent query. “You *know* you have.”

She remained irritably mute.

“Tell me what’s wrong, Alby.”

THOSE HAZEL EYES LIT ON HIM WITH SUCH DISLIKE THAT HE felt as if she’d punched him in the stomach. “You have no right to call me that.”

“Don’t I?” He gave a bark of laughter, devoid of humor. “You’re my *wife*, even if you might not like the fact.”

She set her jaw. “Indeed. And as your *wife*, I would think that her husband shouldn’t keep secrets from her.”

Now he was completely lost. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play me for a fool, Michael!” She stood up and turned her back on him, as if trying to keep her composure. “I know about your mistress!”

The deafening silence that followed her accusation caused his grip to tighten on his glass.

When she spun around to face him, her eyes were sparking with anger and unshed tears, the color growing higher on her cheeks. “I overheard you talking to that messenger in your study the morning after—” She broke off, as if unable to even remind herself of the night that had changed everything for him.

Apparently, it had done nothing for her.

“So instead of believing that you made a mistake,” he said quietly,

“you choose to stand there and paint me as the villain, condemning me for a snippet of a conversation that you know *nothing* about.”

She crossed her arms. “I know what I heard.” She tossed her head.

“Besides, it’s not as if you’ve been living a life of celibacy while we’ve been apart.”

Michael felt a blistering rage boiling up inside of him. For the past five years, he *had* been faithful, waiting for the only woman he’d ever loved to return to him. But now, to have her throw all those years of torment in his face—

He threw his glass into the fire, ignoring it when it shattered, sending sparks from the liquor blazing in the hearth. “Damn you, woman!” he roared. He pointed an accusing finger at her. “I have stayed in this house for the past five years, yearning for the one thing I dared to let go. I know you won’t believe me when I tell you that I have not taken a lover in your absence, nor will you believe that I still love you.” He snorted. “But obviously *love* is nothing more than a poison that rots the mind, causing mistrust and betrayal to take root. I had hoped that when you arrived, things might be different,

but now I can see that we are at an impasse. And while it may be difficult to obtain a divorce, the cost might very well drain my coffers, I now know that is the *only* way to ever make you happy.”

WITH NOTHING ELSE TO BE SAID, MICHAEL LEFT THE LIBRARY, slamming the door on his way out.



ALBINA JUMPED AT MICHAEL’S DEPARTURE. IN ALL HER LIFE, she had never seen him so angry. She actually feared that he might strike her; his eyes were blazing with such a swirling mixture of pain and fury.

She slowly sank back down upon the settee. Her entire body was shaking and she knew her legs wouldn’t be able to support her any longer.

She put a trembling hand to her mouth, too distraught to even let any tears fall. She hadn’t imagined it, she knew that much. She *had* overheard Michael speak of another woman — Petranella — had even heard him mention that Albina couldn’t know about her.

So what other conclusion was she supposed to arrive at?

But after that explosion, now she had to reassess everything. Michael had seemed so... *adamant*, so brutally honest in his innocence, that now she began to doubt where her imagination had led her.

She put her face in her hands.

Unfortunately, it had been too easy to think that her husband was keeping sordid secrets from her. Even after the night where she had dared to dream that they were finally going to be able to get past their differences and make amends, she had dared to see him in the worst light come morning. She claimed that she loved Michael, but would she condemn him so easily if that were true?

Maybe he was right and they should just petition the church for a divorce. But not only would it be a trying and expensive ordeal, just as he claimed, but then they would truly be alone. As it was, she still felt that tenuous thread of affection between them, that connection, but after today, she might have very well severed that last tie, where there was no going back.

Or moving forward.

In spite of her doubts, she might have very well just broken her own heart.

“Oh, my lady! There you are!” Mrs. Humphrey burst into the library with a harried look on her face.

Albina instantly got to her feet, but something told her she already knew why the housekeeper was so upset. “Has something happened?”

She nabbed a handkerchief from her dress pocket and dabbed at her eyes. “Oh, in all my years I’ve never even heard of such a thing!” She

TURNED HER WEATHERED FACE TO HER MISTRESS AND CRIED,
“The master is leaving!”

The blood drained from Albina's face. She knew Michael was mad, but she never expected this. "*Leaving?* Where does he intend to go?"

The older woman threw up her hands in exasperation. "He said he would be taking rooms at the local inn until the St. John's Eve celebration." She shook her head. "I just don't know what's brought this on, my lady. I can't imagine why he would suddenly leave his own estate in order to seek... *lodgings* in the village! Oh, it's just unheard of!" she wailed. "What will people think?"

That his wife is a beast to live with... "I'll see if I can talk to him."

Mrs. Humphrey reached out and grasped Albina's hand. "Oh, my lady, that would be ever so kind if you could convince him to stay."

Albina wasn't sure she'd have much luck, but she went upstairs to Michael's chamber. There, she found that he was, indeed, packing a bag to depart, his towering form hunched over the bed. His valet wasn't in sight, having likely run away in horror at the way her husband had just thrown clothing asunder.

At a loss of what to say, she cleared her throat delicately, finally gaining his attention. He shot a dark look over his shoulder. "What are you doing here?" he snapped. "I thought we'd already said everything there is to say."

Since she didn't know how to reply to that, she thought of the dear housekeeper and said, "You don't have to do this. Mrs. Humphrey is beside herself."

This caused him to pause. "That is regrettable. I never wanted to upset her."

She sighed heavily. “Look, Michael. We are two, responsible adults.

Surely you can manage to put up with my presence in this house until Wednesday.”

“And what might change then?” he asked with a snort.

“I’ll be returning to London, of course.” Again, he hesitated, but this time he turned to face her fully. She waited for him to speak, but when he didn’t, she went on. “I would leave now if you prefer it, but I have enjoyed working on the arrangements for the St. John’s Eve celebration on Tuesday evening. I promise that as soon as the clock strikes midnight, I will be back on the road to London and you never have to see me again.”

She turned her face from his direct stare, swallowing heavily. “I’m sorry about earlier. I may have reacted... prematurely, but please understand, I never meant to hurt you, nor was my purpose in coming

BACK TO BEAULEY HALL TO CAUSE YOU MORE DIFFICULTY. I only wanted to see if things could be... better between us. Now that I know they can’t, I will remain at Baine House.”

She knew the next sentence she uttered would be her undoing, but she also knew that it needed to be said. “I don’t see a cause for divorce unless you are set upon the course, and if that is the case, I won’t contest it.” She held her breath, waiting for him to reply, but when he didn’t, she turned to leave. She paused at the door, saying over her shoulder. “Goodbye, Chael.

I’m truly sorry it ended up this way.”



MICHAEL WANTED TO SMASH SOMETHING. HE WANTED TO throw a vase across the room and enjoy the sound of it breaking, if only to have the satisfaction of doing so. If he were in London, he would make a trip to Gentleman Jackson's Boxing Saloon and pick a fight with the first man he saw and pummel the living daylights out of him, perhaps even challenge the famed pugilist himself.

At this point, anything would be better than the swirling, internal strife that was going on inside of his body. His brain was telling him to be rational, his heart was beating with the continued, irrational hope of unrequited love, and his fists were yearning to punch something. He was a complete mess, because now he had no idea what to do. He was absolutely at a loss. When he'd left the library, he had been so furious that anything his eyes touched turned red. He had been set upon ridding himself of her once and for all.

But not fifteen minutes later, Albina dared to approach him and spins him in a completely different direction.

He clenched his jaw. He *wanted* to hold on to his anger, to his bruised pride. He didn't *want* to forgive her, but he knew that he would have no choice in the end but to relent to his heart's desire. That fickle organ in his chest had caused more problems for him than he'd been willing to accept, and it seemed it wasn't through with him yet.

Ten



A lady must never drink to excess...

Lady A's Advice Column

Albina had been relieved when Michael decided to stay at Beauley Hall, if only for Mrs. Humphrey's sake, who thanked her profusely. She would have also liked to be able to take the credit for getting Michael to listen to reason even if he might detest the thought of residing under the same roof as she did, if only for a few days.

But she knew he had only remained because of her promise that she would soon be gone, tossed out of his life and forgotten like the contents of a chamber pot.

For the next few days, they were careful to avoid each other. Albina returned to taking a tray in her rooms, and when she did venture downstairs to speak with the staff about St. John's Eve, Michael was either closeted in his study, or had gone *out*.

In all that time, she hadn't seen the messenger return, and the name Petranella was never uttered again.

But now that she only had one day left at Beaufrey Hall, the arrangements all set for the big celebration she decided that she would have a party of her own. She skipped dinner, because her stomach was honestly not prepared for food of any kind, but she managed to sneak a bottle of port from Michael's study on the rare occasion he wasn't there.

Then again, it was well after midnight and he, as well as most of the staff, had already retired. She would have preferred a bit of sherry, but since it was the only thing she could find, it would have to do, even though it was considered a *gentleman's* drink.

She crept to the music room at the back of the house where she might not disturb anyone, and took her first bracing sip of the wine where she sat on the pianoforte bench. She saw the large mirror on the opposite wall, so she tipped up the bottle and mockingly toasted her reflection. She normally shied away from spirits as she didn't have the constitution to abide them, but tonight, she was making an exception. She would likely pay for it in the morning with a megrim and a sour stomach as well, but again, exceptions would have to be made.

For just a time, she wanted something that would dull her senses, and perhaps even give her a decent night's sleep, since insomnia had been her only companion of late.

BESIDES, IF GENTLEMEN COULD DO IT, WHY COULDN'T SHE? She was a grown woman who had done her duty in life, even if it might be falling apart now. In her mind, that was even more of a reason to enjoy the little things that life had to offer, or in this case, Michael's liquor cabinet.

By the time she was starting to feel a bit more relaxed, she decided that the room was much too quiet. Sitting the half empty bottle down on the floor beside her, she poised her hands above the keys of the instrument and searched her mind for the appropriate notes of Mozart's No. 24 in C

minor. It was time she put those countless music lessons her mother paid a fortune for to good use.

She closed her eyes, waiting for the magic to happen — and hit the wrong note. Her eyes popped open on a frown. She was a bit out of practice, to be sure, but surely she could recall how to play a simple piano concerto. But when she tried again, she was rewarded with the same results.

Grumbling, she snagged her bottle of port from the floor. She took a drink and stared at the ivory and black keys before her. "You're just doing this on purpose because you belong to *him*," she muttered. "You're probably not even in proper tune—"

"There's nothing wrong with the piano."

Albina jerked in surprised, causing her to lose her tenuous hold on the bottle, sending it crashing to the floor. While it was remarkable that the glass didn't break, the dark red liquid began to leak out of the opening.

"Oh, look what you made me do!" If she were standing, she would likely have stamped her foot in irritation.

As she leaned backward to grab the bottle, she found that her balance wasn't quite as steady as she had imagined. She would have hit the floor if Michael hadn't rushed forward to catch her. As if her current state inebriated state wasn't bad enough for him to witness. It was just another fault in her list of growing transgressions.

“Let’s get you to bed, shall we?” he said.

Albina wanted to hope that there was a touch of concern in his deep voice, but she wasn’t going to believe something that wasn’t there. “What about the bottle—?”

“I’ll have one of the servants take care of it,” he interrupted stoically.

“It may stain—”

“It will be fine.” He helped her to stand, but it was as if all the bones in the lower half of her body had congealed into something resembling warm pudding.

AS SHE STARTED TO COLLAPSE INTO ANOTHER HEAP ON THE floor, she felt herself cradled in a pair of strong arms and nestled against a warm chest.

She instantly nuzzled closer to the pleasing scent that wafted to her nostrils. “You smell divine,” she whispered.

His only reply was, “You never could handle your alcohol.”

“I’m perfectly fine—” She frowned, her vision fuzzy. Was she dreaming, or had she learned how to fly? “Wait. Are you carrying me?”

She paused. “*Again?*”

“It seems to have become something of a recent habit,” he returned dryly.

She wiggled in his arms. “Oh, you must put me down!”

He grunted. “Hold still, unless you want me to drop you.”

She instantly ceased her struggles. “But surely I’m too heavy—”

“Haven’t I already proven that I’m not *that* old that just yet?” His lips twitched, and suddenly she wanted nothing more than to kiss him soundly on the mouth.

She shook her head. Dear Lord, the wine must have gone straight to my head.

Michael entered her bedchamber and set her on her feet near the bed.

His eyes were warm and filled with desire as his hands slowly slid away from her. He paused, as if he wanted to say something, but in the end, he stepped back and murmured, “I think you can make it from here.”

When he started to turn away, Albina reached out and grabbed hold of his shirtsleeve. “What if I wanted you to stay?”

His jaw clenched, but he didn’t move. “Why? What good would that do either of us? We already know what’s going to happen after tomorrow.”

She swallowed, her throat dry. “Because, good or not, I’ve never stopped wanting you, Chael.” She sighed, a quivering thread of emotion causing her voice to tremble. “I always have, and I always will.”

He turned and captured her face between his large palms, growling with a mixture between pleasure and pain. “God, Albina. No matter what happens between us, I can’t seem to stop myself from bowing to your every need, your every desire. I only wish that I was enough.” His throat worked with suppressed emotion. “All I’ve ever wanted is for you to be happy. It’s the reason why I left London five years ago. It

wasn't because I stopped loving you, but because I was afraid that if I stayed, my love would destroy you. I wanted to give you back your freedom, to give you space to do the only thing you truly wanted, to write."

ALBINA FELT A SOB WELLING UP IN HER CHEST, BUT SHE pushed it back down.

She clutched his shoulders and looked him straight in the eye, praying that he could see how sincere her words were. "You are all I've ever needed, Chael. You always have been. It's true that I needed to find myself again, and not just so I could pen an advice column for a monthly article. But when you left, that is what nearly destroyed me. I thought you didn't care about me anymore."

He pressed his forehead against hers. "God, I've been such a blind fool. All this time I thought I was doing right by you, but all I've managed to do is injure us both."

"We were *both* wrong," she corrected. "If it hadn't been for our pride standing in the way, we might have spent the past five years together instead of apart. But because we didn't know what to say to each other, we've wasted so much time." The sob she'd been trying so hard to contain finally escaped. "I don't want to waste any more. I want us to be together.

Always."

Michael blew out a breath, shaking his head. "Miracles can come true, after all," he whispered, as he caught her mouth with his.

Albina felt tears course down her face, but she ignored them as she clung to Michael as if she were his only tether to

this earth.

They undressed quickly and fell upon her bed in a naked tangle of arms and legs. They kissed and touched and loved one another until the dawn rose. And after a long and satisfying night, they fell asleep, cradled in each other's arms.

Eleven



A lady must never make a public display...

Lady A's Advice Column

Albina awoke to the sun shining brightly through a crack in the drapes. For the first time in years, she was eager to face the new day.

Surprisingly enough, even though she had drunk nearly a half bottle of port, she felt no ill effects. Not only that, but after last night, she'd laid all her inhibitions about Michael to rest. She was determined to face any problems that might arise between them, with an open mind and *not* to jump to any more unsavory conclusions.

She rolled over in bed and expected to find her husband gone, but instead, she rejoiced to see him lying beside her. She blushed, knowing what a sight Helen must have walked in on that morning, not expecting her mistress to have company in her bed.

She wanted to reach out and stroke her hand down that strong furry chest, maybe even slide a bit lower to stroke his glorious cock, but she refrained. Today was St. John's Eve,

and there were some last minute preparations that she needed to see to.

She carefully crawled out of bed and grabbed her robe, slipping it on over her nakedness. Going into her husband's room, she rang for Helen and asked for a bath to be prepared. Her maid obeyed her commands, although there was a pleased smile around the corners of her lips.

Once Albina was dressed in a simple lavender day gown, she went downstairs to seek out Mrs. Humphrey, stunned to find that it was already mid-afternoon. She found the housekeeper in the kitchen speaking with the cook. The moment she spied Albina, she offered a curtsy. "Good morning, my lady. I was just going over things with Mrs. Dryler. I think we're all set for tonight."

"I'm relieved to hear it," Albina replied. "Are you sure there isn't anything I might assist with?"

The housekeeper patted her hand. "Not to worry, it's all in hand.

You've done so much already, it's time to enjoy the fruits of your labor."

She offered a kind smile, but then raised a finger. "Oh, I nearly forgot! I went to the village this morning, and Mrs. Brandt asked me to deliver this to you for tonight's celebration."

Albina accepted the box, knowing what was inside. But in all the excitement and turmoil that she had been dealing with Michael, she had nearly forgotten the silver gown that she'd commissioned the local

MODISTE TO MAKE FOR HER. NOW, SHE COULDN'T WAIT TO count down the hours until she could wear it. She hoped that Michael would approve. "Thank you."

She was on her way back up to her chamber when she was grabbed from behind on the first floor landing. She gasped as Michael's arms went around her, and his teeth grazed the side of her neck, causing a rush of desire to course through her body. "There's my beautiful wife." He licked a trail of fire to her earlobe, nipping the tip of it before letting her go. His gaze dropped to the box held in her grasp. "What do you have there?"

She lifted her chin and tightened her grip on the package. "It's a surprise."

He grinned wickedly. "I love surprises."

Albina's stomach clenched. She couldn't believe that she was still in need of this man after he'd pleased her so thoroughly just a few short hours ago.

"My lord, this just arrived for you."

Albina looked at the simple sealed letter that Jeffries handed to his master as if it were a snake, coiled and ready to strike. *Don't even think it*, she chided herself.

She watched Michael carefully as he tore open the missive. He frowned, but after a moment, his face cleared. "Good news?" she asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Very." He smiled broadly and she couldn't help but melt. "Go upstairs and get ready. The festivities will be starting soon."

As she turned her back on him, he swatted her behind playfully. A giggle rose up in her throat, but she contained it until she reached the sanctity of her room.



HELEN HAD JUST PUT THE FINISHING TOUCHES ON HER mistress' hair when there was a brisk knock at the door. "Are you nearly ready?" It was her husband's impatient voice. "Our guests are waiting for the festivities to begin, but we can't do that without the lord *and* lady of the house present."

"It never stopped you before," she couldn't help but call out in return.

It was hard to let go of the past five years, even though it seemed as though she might be lingering on after St. John's Day after all.

"New rule."

Albina smiled as she rose to her feet. She knew that she looked her best tonight, the silver of her gown showing off her every curve to the best

ADVANTAGE. HER SUBDUED COPPER HAIR WAS PULLED BACK into an elegant chignon and she wore an elegant silver wreath, strewn with seed pearls upon top, an early anniversary gift from Michael. It was hard to believe how fast twenty-five years of marriage had gone by.

She only prayed that the next twenty-five were even better.

Helen let herself out of the door of Albina's sitting room. So after a deep breath, she walked over and opened the door for Michael. He stood on the other side, looking entirely resplendent in his black and white finery. While it might have

looked simple on any other man, the stark contrast only highlighted his towering frame and the silver at his temples.

For a man who was nearly fifty years old, he looked better than some men who were half his age.

But while she admired him, she had the feeling it was nothing compared to the smoldering heat in his brown eyes as he regarded her. He let his gaze drop to the floor, slowly dragging it back up the length of her.

He lifted his hand and ran a finger across the bottom of his lip, his gaze stopping momentarily on the swell of her breasts.

“And just when I thought nothing could be more tempting than the red...” he murmured. He reached out and took her chin in his grasp. “You are absolutely delectable, my dear. I can’t wait to peel this lovely material off of you later.”

He kissed her until they were both breathless. When he pulled back, she said, “It’s tradition to wait until midnight.”

“Hang tradition.” He growled. “Tonight you’re mine and I don’t feel like sharing.”

“We should at least make an appearance, remember?” she said, although she realized she wouldn’t mind it if they didn’t make it downstairs either.

He sighed. “I suppose you’re right.” He threaded her arm through his.

“We do have expectations to uphold, and an entire village that is waiting on us.”

She turned her face up to look at him and wondered what she’d done to deserve such an incredible man. “Then let’s not disappoint them.”



MICHAEL'S HEART SWELLED IN HIS CHEST AS HE OBSERVED HIS wife chatting and laughing her way through the crowd of merry makers. A large bonfire had been constructed in the front lawn, casting everything in a flickering glow, its flames licking far upward into the clear, night sky. It was a warm

SUMMER'S EVENING, BUT WHEN HE LOOKED AT ALBINA, HE WAS filled with a fire of a different sort. After all this time, it was like seeing her again for the first time. *What have I done to deserve such an incredible woman?*

He was so focused on his wife that he didn't notice it when a woman appeared at his elbow. "Lord Beaufort?"

He glanced down to see a simple woman with plain brown hair and direct blue eyes looking at him. Beside her stood an older gentleman with a tuft of white hair and a gentle smile, his arm wrapped up and bundled next to his chest.

Michael held out a hand to him. "Mr. Holmes. I'm glad that you could join us this evening. It's been a long time, but I'm glad I was able to persuade you to attend tonight."

The other man accepted the offering graciously. "I must say I was rather surprised to receive your invitation, my lord. Your request was rather... untoward. In all my days as a vicar I daresay I've never heard of such a thing."

"Just ask my wife and she'll tell you that I'm far from being normal."

He winked. “I’m just glad you were able to make it. After your daughter wrote to me and told me that you’d broken your arm, I didn’t think you would be well enough to travel.”

He turned to bow at the lady. “And of course, Miss Holmes. I’m thankful that you could accompany your father.”

“Like my father said, your request was rather untoward, so I was naturally curious. I wouldn’t have missed it.”

He offered an arm to Miss Holmes. “Would you care to meet my wife?”

“Indeed, I would, my lord.”



ALBINA TOOK A SIP OF MRS. DRYLER’S SPECIAL PUNCH TO quench her parched throat. She was quite sure that the entire village of Yarmouth had dedicated this one night of the year to her husband and the grand celebration that honored the birth of the famous saint.

With so much activity going on around her, children frolicking about in play, adults of all differing ages talking and laughing amongst one another, it was truly a magical night to behold.

She glanced over her shoulder to try and find Michael in the crowd.

The moment they’d walked outside and greeted their guests, they had been pulled in opposite directions. They still hadn’t managed to find a moment

ALONE TOGETHER, BUT AS MIDNIGHT DREW NEAR, SHE KNEW that he would find a way for them to be together, come what may.

Suddenly, she saw Chael, walking over to her with a comely brunette on his arm. An older gentleman walked on his other side. While he looked vaguely familiar, it was the young woman attached to her husband who drew her attention.

As the trio stopped before her, Albina looked at Michael curiously.

“My dear,” he bowed respectfully. “I’d like to introduce you to Miss Petranella Holmes and her father, Mr. Elliot Holmes.”

Albina frowned, the name sending another niggling wave of slight recognition to her brain. But it wasn’t the father that captured her focus so much as the name of his daughter. *Petranella...*

She focused on her husband. “Michael, what’s this all about?”

His warm brown eyes softened as he looked at her. “Trust me?”

Albina wanted to waver, to let the old doubts sink in, but instead, she gave a brief nod of her head. “Yes.”

He turned to the assembled crowd. Putting two fingers to his mouth, he released a loud whistle. “Might I have everyone’s attention?” he yelled, and the boisterous crowd quieted down to a dull murmur. “As you know, St. John’s Eve has always been a special day for me, for not only is it a time when I can show my appreciation for all the hard work you do for me and my estate, but it is also the evening before the happiest day of my life, the day I married my bride.”

A round of applause sounded throughout the assembled throng. “In just a few minutes, at the stroke of midnight, my wife and I will be celebrating twenty-five years of marriage. Since all that time has not always been easy, and because it is a rather important milestone in my life, I wanted to reaffirm my love for the former Miss Albina Waterton in a rather unconventional way.”

He waved his hand to indicate Mr. Holmes. “I have asked the vicar who prepared our original vows to be here tonight, accompanied by his daughter Miss Petranella Holmes, with all of you standing witness, so that I might ask my wife to marry me.”

At long last, he turned to Albina. “Again.”

He bent down on one knee in front of her. “Mrs. Albina Baine, Viscountess Beauley, heart of my heart and love of my life, I ask if you would, once again, render your wedding vows and marry me for a second time?”

There weren't very many times in her life that Albina found herself at a loss for words, but with Chael kneeling before her, completely

VULNERABLE AND LAYING HIS HEART AND HIS PRIDE BARE FOR one and all to see, it shattered something inside of her.

She fell to her knees and threw her arms around his neck. Caught off balance, he fell backward with her on top of him, smothering him with kisses. “You silly, ridiculous man! I love you with every beat of my heart.

I will marry you a thousand times over if that is what it takes to convince you of it.” Tears coursed down her cheeks,

but her smile blossomed as bright as the sun. “I’m sorry I ever doubted you. Forgive me.”

He wiped her tears away with the pads of his thumbs. “If you need forgiveness, then so do I. We’re human, so it’s only natural that we make mistakes. Without a doubt, I will make more. But you can rest assured in the knowledge that, no matter what, I will *never* leave you again.”

“I’m very happy to hear that, my lord. For I don’t intend to let you go.”

They kissed again, oblivious to the shouts and cheers going on around them, just as the clock struck twelve.

Epilogue



A lady must make her own rules.

Lady A's Final Advice

Beauley Hall

St. John's Eve

One year later...

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you and Papa so happy,” Mary noted as Albina’s handsome husband, yet again, diverted her attention in the middle of the parlor. A year had passed and things were better now than they’d been when they had first married.

Albina smiled at her oldest child, reaching out her hand to give hers a squeeze. “I’m thankful that you and Stephen are doing well.”

Mary rubbed her swelling belly. “You could say that,” she said with a laugh, and then her expression turned serious. “It’s all because of your sage advice.” She tilted her head to the side. “Are you sure that you aren’t going to continue to pursue your advice column?”

Albina shook her head. “While my publisher was disappointed, he is pleased with my latest endeavors. It turns out that penning Gothic novels appealed to me after all.”

“Much to my everlasting surprise,” Mrs. Lydia Langley sat down across from mother and daughter with a long suffering sigh. “I never thought my toughest competition would come in the form of my dearest friend.”

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Langley,” Albina’s daughter Sarah said as she sat down next to her. “I may love my mother’s stories, but rest assured you shall always have a spot on my bookshelf.”

Lydia looked at her with a grin. “I always knew that you were my favorite.”

The other women laughed good-naturedly, catching the attention of Albina’s son Connor. He walked over with an arrogant swagger to match his father’s. “The four of you cackle like a group of hens,” he teased.

Sarah rolled her eyes. “Don’t you have another woman to harass?

Your wife, for instance?”

He held up his hands and backed away with a wince. “Ouch. Prickly sister for the win again.”

After another round of merriment, Mary turned to her mother. “Who is that man Papa is speaking with?”

ALBINA GLANCED AT THE TALL, DARK BLOND GENTLEMAN IN animated conversation with her husband. “That is your father’s business partner, Julian Solomon.” She pointed to a woman speaking with Connor’s wife, Andrea. “And that is his wife,

Philomena. The baby she's holding is their eight-month-old son, Chael."

"Oh, he's adorable!" Mary gasped, but then a slight frown touched her forehead. "Aren't they a little old to be new parents?"

"They are *our* age!" Albina said with mock affront.

"Like I said," Mary rolled her eyes, although a grin tugged at her lips.

Albina looked at her husband, who was watching her with heated promise in his eyes. Instantly, her entire body warmed as she thought of the night before when they had come together in his bedchamber. But then, she supposed her room was for storing her dresses anymore, for had she slept with her husband every night for the past three hundred and sixty five days.

With a secretive smile playing about her lips, Albina said, "Oh, not to worry. Your father isn't *that* old just yet." Her eyes sparkled with mirth.

"And neither am I."

THE END

About the Author

Tabetha Waite is the multi-award winning author of the historical romance Ways of Love Series. Her debut novel, “Why the Earl is After the Girl,” was published in July of 2016 and won the 2017 Best Indie Book Award in Romance and the 2018 Second Place Feathered Quill Book Award in Romance. “Where the Viscount Met His Match” was a 2019 International Book Award finalist in romance, and a 2019 Book Excellence Award finalist in romance. “When a Duke Pursues a Lady”

was a Book Talk Radio Club finalist in romance in 2018. She is also a certified PAN member of the RWA and holds a milestone pin for 5

published romances.

When she’s not writing, Tabetha is reading as true bookworms do, or checking out any antique mall she comes across. She is a small town, Missouri girl who continues to make her home in the Midwest with her husband and two wonderful daughters.

You can find her on most any social media site, and she encourages fans of her work to join her mailing list for updates.

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Thank you so much for taking the time to read Rogue of My
Heart

Your opinion matters!

Please take a moment to review this anthology on your
favorite review site and share your opinion with fellow
readers.

