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always a witty delight!"*

—LENORA BELL,
USA Today bestselling author



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AND
THE
ROSE

ONCE UPON A
WALLFLOWER SERIES

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*For Mr. Devon who always, always has my back. You are deeply appreciated
in all that you do.*

*And for the boys, who show me the way and teach me so much about love and
myself.*

Chapter One

“I could marry your sister...”

Despite their earnestness and the depth of the secret longing in his soul, the moment the words left his lips, Alexander Markby, sixth Earl of Derby, knew he had made an error. And it wasn't simply because the lady in question was from a class that almost never married into his own. That? Oh, it gave him pause, but not enough to stop the secret wish of his soul.

No, it was the fact his friend, Harry Digby, who had been his friend since childhood as they had scampered over the hills of Yorkshire, hauled back his fist and let fly. The blow was made with such intensity and zeal that it cracked into Alexander's jaw, driving his head back, causing his teeth to clack. He let out a harsh breath, staggered a few feet, brought his hands back up, and made certain to weave away quickly, bouncing on the balls of his toes lest the man knock his block off entirely. “You hit far too hard for a vicar in training,” Alexander said.

Harry shrugged. “God or no God, vicar or no vicar, my fists are hammers, and you knew that when you said that nonsense.”

It was true, but he had hoped with his father's death that now he could truly change things. It seemed not all things. His father's determination that he never, ever marry Rose Digby had been taken up by her brother. And as his oldest friend, he could not defy his friend, not when his friend had suffered so much at Alexander's family's hands.

Alex had been dancing in the ring with Harry for years, and before that they'd had many an opportunity to exchange friendly blows without Queensberry Rules. As it was now, here in Oxford, they had come to their boxing club to get in a round before exams came in.

The hallowed, ancient halls of Oxford were a place of teeming nerves at present. All of the young men knew their futures were dependent upon the

events of the next few weeks.

Well, not all of them.

Men like Alexander? They had fortunes and titles and power they were given merely because of the chance of birth. Now, he did all he could to help people and bestow many patronages. He'd even helped Harry and his sister, though they did not know it, for he'd been certain they wouldn't accept his assistance, not after the way his father had thrown them off his land all those years ago. But almost the moment after his father died, he had set things in motion with a solicitor. Money for Harry to attend school and a sum to pull his dear Rose out of poverty and give her some independence after the tragic deaths of both of her parents.

Yes, he was born to greatness by sheer chance. Though some insisted it was God's ordination. He had no desire to discuss the theology of it. Harry, on the other hand, would have to strive mightily to make certain he attained his degree. After all, he wouldn't be able to achieve a family living without it. And the truth was Alex desperately wanted his friend to succeed. He wanted his friend to find that living, to be the vicar he longed to be, even if it meant that they were completely and totally different, in both class and attitudes to life.

Countering Alex's movements, swinging around the ring, Harry firmly declared, "My sister will never marry you."

He didn't say anything clever in reply. It was tempting to make some sort of salvo about his sister, Rose, but he adored Rose. Rose had been just like them until, of course, she was no longer allowed to be. She'd acted as much of a boy as any of the lads who had come across the estates. They had ridden horses, crossed streams, climbed trees, played at swords and dragons, determined to slay, as St. George had done, the nefarious beast who was a mayhem to all maids and castles around. But inevitably things had changed, and Rose had had to take on the raiment of a young lady.

Her intellect was sharper than both Harry's and his own combined. There was no discussion about that. She was not allowed to go to Eton or Harrow. University wasn't a possibility. And then there was the fact that Rose and her brother were nowhere near the same as him in social status. Years ago, they'd lived on his father's, now his, land. They had been given a house at his father's pleasure until his father no longer felt that pleasure...because of Mr. Digby and his descent into debauchery. It had been a year of deep regrets. He could still remember them being cast out of the house, sent off the land with

nowhere to go.

It had been the most painful night in his life. It had been the night when his father had first told him to never see Rose Digby again, lest he crush the Digby family further. The bitter pain of that shame laced through his mind. Even now, he could not forget the image of Rose's mother begging his father to let them stay, to not cast them out and condemn them to despair and the dangers of life without income or home.

It burned through him. For he could still see Rose's pale face, a face that had transformed from the bright young woman who had been his companion in mischief and conversation about the nature of the world to one of fear. And worse as she had realized that even Alex could not make his father stop.

Alex shoved the memory away. He could not bear to think of that year of pain when he had not only lost his friend, but Rose, too, for they had all been in each other's pockets, but it had become clear to his father and his grandmother that they could no longer tolerate a man like Rose's father, Mr. Digby, on the land. It was a damned coil because Alex's own father was a rake. Alex was a rake, and he would be one until he married. And in the face of so much pain, he had found that the endless laughter and parties of a rake had dulled the sudden emptiness of having been cut off from his dearest friends. And in that world of rakes, he'd also found his purpose as a patron. A patron of musicians, artists, writers. And so many powerful men had mistresses and gambled, but men like Rose's father, an artist in the keep of a great man? Well, he had had to be a great deal more careful with his behavior. He had not been careful. And it had all fallen apart.

The devastation left by Mr. Digby resulted in his son and daughter choosing the paths of reformers. But the only reason Harry could attend Oxford was the funds that Alexander had provided, for Mr. Digby had lost it all and worse. Regret and guilt traced their friendship. They never spoke of Harry's father. He was a specter over them. After all, his friend's father was in the Lock Asylum and would be until he died. It was a possibility for all rakes. He was aware of it, but the truth was most rakes could behave as a rake without having to worry about serious consequences, especially when one was an earl with undeniable amounts of money coming toward one.

Still, the comment that Rose would never marry him sat ill. Of course, he simply couldn't marry Rose. The comment had been one of idle jest. From a purely practical point, Rose was far beneath him in status. Even if he admired her, his grandmother would never approve. Society would never approve of

Rose, and yet he could still see Rose's fiery eyes and hear the cut of her clever tongue as she made witty comeback after witty comeback as they practiced their orations together.

She could read Greek and translate it back into English without any difficulty while he and her brother had scrambled along, tossing the pages of their books back and forth, desperately trying to translate Ovid. She had laughed. She always laughed at them and made merry, and how he had adored it.

"Do you think so little of me?" Alex suddenly blurted. He lowered his guard for a moment, which allowed his friend again to get in another blow. It was a foolish action on his part, and he whipped around.

"What do you mean, do I think little of you?" Harry asked, twisting left.

Alex darted in and jabbed Harry's nose. "You've just said your sister would never marry me."

Harry winced and danced away. "Well, you're a rake. She loathes rakes."

He swallowed. It was true. She had become a fierce and mighty advocate of good living. So had her brother. It was why Harry was pursuing the life of a vicar. In response to their own papa who had descended into madness and debauchery, they were symbols of perfect and upright living, never missing a step, and suddenly Alex felt like he was being tolerated.

Most would've thought it was the other way around. He was an earl, after all. He had all the power, the money, the influence. Surely, it was he who was tolerating them. He winced at that thought. No, he realized. Rose didn't even tolerate him anymore. They never saw each other. She was in London working, writing. It was her great passion, doing all she could to change the world while he and her brother were at university. If she had been allowed to attend, she would have changed the world. There was no doubt in his mind about that, but she could not, so she had to change it in other ways.

"I think we should go," he said, blowing out a breath.

"Ah, have I hurt your feelings?" Harry asked, lowering his fists.

He shook his head. "Think nothing of it."

Harry grimaced, knowing such pleasantries were code for how hurt he was. "Look, you know Rose. She will have nothing to do with you. She might spend a bit of time in your company, but until you pull yourself together and get on the straight and narrow, she's never going to want to entertain you. And the fact is, it's true. She'd never marry a man like you."

A man like him. A man of power, a man of money, a man who helped

others with that money, who swept up artists and ensured that those artists could live and work and be fed?

But he didn't want to go into a defense of himself and his actions. No. If all they saw was a man who enjoyed wine, women, and song... But something rattled through him, and he longed to protest. "Rose is—"

Harry gave him a hard look. "Cease such jesting."

"And if...I truly admired Rose?"

A muscle tightened in Harry's jaw. "Look, you are my dearest friend, but she is not for you. You are too different. Her entire life is dedicated to writing about the indulgences of your class. You are everything she despises. Leave her alone."

"Should I wear a hair shirt?" he teased, though the effort tore like barbs in his throat.

Harry sighed. "You? I cannot imagine it."

"There are other ways to do good than through austerity. There are other sacrifices," he argued.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "I will not see her unhappy. And marriage into your family?" Harry shook his head as if the very idea was appalling.

How could he go against his friend? After all his family had done to Harry? And his remaining family would fight him every step of the way if he pursued Rose. For the truth was, Rose and Harry were from a different world. And wishing, longing, would not change that. It would be bitter and hard if Harry fought him, too.

Alex jumped out of the ring, followed closely by his friend. "Are you coming out tonight then?" he asked, grabbing a folded piece of linen.

Harry laughed jovially, clearly relieved Alex was dropping the subject of Rose. "Not if I plan on being a vicar. I don't let ladies sit on my lap like you do. No, I'll be at my books instead."

The comment was not meant to be derogatory, but Alex felt it in his bones. He should be more serious. He should study more. He should do the things that his friend was doing. He should be sober. He should go for long walks. He should eschew cake and spend most of his time doing good for all people.

And yet he felt certain there was a point to joy and celebration, too, to revelry, and passion, and prose and poetry. There was a positivity to what he did, and he refused to be ashamed for it. He was not his friend's father. He was not going to end up in The Locke, and he wasn't going to ruin his family, but he refused to say such a thing because he wouldn't hurt his friend, not for

anything.

“Well, I’m off with the other lords,” Alex said with a salute. “I wish you excellent studies.”

“Alex,” his friend suddenly said, his face growing serious.

“Yes?”

“I need you to promise me you’ll stay away from Rose.”

The words socked him in the gut. Far worse than any blow could have done, for the look in Harry’s gaze was grim. “What?”

Harry squared his shoulders, clearly daring to make his point to a friend but also a man far above his station. “Stay away from her because if you go near her, if you corrupt her in any way, if you drag her into your circle, if you were to ruin her, I could never forgive you. I would hate you.”

A muscle tightened in Harry’s jaw as if all this pained him greatly. “You’re my friend, and I feel that that matters to you just as it does to me. So take my warning. I may be a lowly man who only hopes to be a vicar, but if you value me at all, know that Rose is not for you, and I don’t want you within ten feet of her. Understand?”

Alex forced a smile and gave him a wink. “Your sister’s not my type. She never has been, she never will be, and you’ve nothing to fear.” Lies. Every word a lie. But he couldn’t hurt his friend. He’d hurt himself instead. That was the right thing to do. After Harry had suffered so much and was only just beginning to feel joy again. Yes, Alex was ready to sacrifice his own longings. It was the only way to begin to make amends.

Even as his insides twisted and his thoughts began to churn around his head, he whipped around and strode out toward the halls out to the other lords who were ready to go gamble and make merry for the night. Alex forced a smile to his lips, but that smile, it felt horrid. For inside he felt hollow as if he had just had his guts ripped out and made into garters by his friend. For Harry was certain he would never be good enough for Rose, despite the fact he was an earl. But he would not cease helping his friends. Or protecting them. He had decided to take up their patronage, to shield them from as much of life’s pain as he could, even though he knew they’d never accept it from him.

So he would do all he could in secret. Though he would keep his vow to his friend to stay away from Rose, he would do everything he could to help all the people he could. He had to find a way to make amends for what his father had done abandoning tormented souls like Mr. Digby and his family. But he would never stop trying to help those artists and dreamers who had broken on

the shores of sorrow.
Not for anything.

Chapter Two

Miss Rose Digby was used to getting into scrapes and getting herself out of them again. In fact, she rather loved that about herself, her curiosity and capability combined with the independence she'd created through sheer will over the years. Still, even for her, being tossed out summarily onto her bum from a house of ill repute was a new experience. She landed rather unceremoniously in a puddle, winced, and was concerned about placing her hands down into the murk to stand up again.

And yet she had no choice, for no one was coming to give her aid. No one came to give ladies like her aid, not truth-tellers, not people determined to expose the cruelty of the world for what it was, and certainly not for those who were determined to help those who needed it. It did not matter if they were high or low, poor or wealthy. Rose was determined to assist those who had lost themselves to a world of pain, of agony, and of shame. She'd do everything in her power to help those who lost themselves at the clubs, like the one behind her.

She glanced back over her shoulder only to catch sight of the majordomo of the establishment, who was in quite clichéd fashion brushing his white-gloved hands together as though he could somehow get rid of her from those items. His lip curled, and his brows furrowed together.

"Don't come back," he warned. "We shall put you on a list."

She huffed. "If I wish to come back, I shall," she said. "And I shall come back in better disguise. A courtesan, perhaps!"

He rolled his eyes. "No one would ever mistake you for a courtesan."

"I see," she said, arching a brow, ignoring the damp seeping into her gown. "And what does a courtesan look like?"

"Not like you."

She scowled as he turned and headed back into the side of the exclusive

place. It was just off Pall Mall, tucked down a street that was at present choked with coaches. She had heard and understood that coaches would line up for hours to eject their exclusive clientele into the club. Cyprians, courtesans, mistresses, women of the night would come and wait their turn to be allowed to descend into the club, and then, of course, they would be picked up again with their keeper or a keeper that they had found for that evening.

The place was generally the type where the highest lords of the land went inside, hence the exclusivity and the quietness of the street off Pall Mall. The building was beautiful. It was made of white stone with Doric columns soaring up into the sky. The glass windows were polished to perfection. The wrought iron over the windows meant to keep everyone out, prying people like herself.

The doors toward the front were open, emitting a golden glow. She could hear laughter inside, the tinkling of champagne glasses, and the soft strain of music flowing out onto the perfect pavement. It was clear that some of the horses had been at the corner of the building, where she was. Still, she would not be daunted. Being daunted was not her style. For if she was daunted, she would not have climbed so far as she had in the world of pamphlet writing or general exposure of the nefarious behavior of certain members of the upper classes. Nor would she be able to help as many people as she did.

But she was not done helping. She was determined to help more. She wanted to expose what went on in these places, to show the world that being a rake, being a debauched person, was not the joy and revelatory experience that so many thought it was from the books they read. The joy did not last, if it ever existed at all.

No, such places were a doorway to a path that led to pain, to debt, to madness, and if she could help but one person see that before they slipped inside those doors and lost themselves, lost their families, lost their homes, lost everything, by God, she would do the world a great service.

Just one. Just one would be enough.

And she would feel such relief in her heart and soul. She wished she could save more. She still wished she could save her father. She wished she could save her mother from the misery that her father had brought them. She wished she could save her brother from the agonies, being such a man's son. And she wished she could save herself from the past and the images that still clouded her brain, but she couldn't.

Those memories were engraved in her heart and her brain, the pain of her father slipping further and further, drawn to brandy, drawn to the gambling tables, and worse as he slipped further and further away from the man that he had been, the father that she had known, the artist that he could have been, into something so small that he could not even recognize himself.

She shoved herself up, dripping, and stared at her dirty gloves and refused to feel downtrodden. She glanced about. There had to be a way into these places. She could write a great deal about them, of course, but without getting inside, without seeing what happened in them, well, she was only going to be writing secondhand. And that wasn't going to come from a place of visceral knowledge, and she needed that.

She needed to see the stories, the women selling themselves with false smiles upon their lips and jewels about their necks, smiles that would fade as disease overtook them, and jewels that would be pawned to pay for their children's upkeep and their own. It would all disappear, and most would die in hovels, in debt. She had spoken and exchanged letters with those women, women who had been sparkling jewels of the demimonde. They had been at the heights of the sinful set only to die alone with nothing, sometimes having to leave England and go abroad to France because they were so detested by society, so shamed for what they had done.

Rose didn't believe in shame. Shame was not a useful tool, nor was guilt. No, just facts. Facts were important. If people knew the facts, then that would keep them away from pain, and that was all she wanted—to keep people away from pain. She swung her gaze to the coaches now departing into the night air. And as the sun lowered over the horizon, leaving the city in a purple glow, she spotted a familiar crest. It couldn't be. She scowled anew. Of course it could. Of course he would be here.

Derby. Alex.

Yes. There it was, the falcon on a green background, on a particularly beautiful and well-appointed coach. The Earl of Derby, her childhood friend, a man she had not seen in years, was here. She felt a moment of deep resentment that he had abandoned her so entirely, so thoroughly, when her father had been kicked off his land and when he had gone to university with her brother. She had not seen him since.

More fool she, once...once, she had hoped that he might see her as more than a friend. A mirror to his soul, one he might love. She shook the thought away. Such a thought had been ridiculous. The ideas of a girl who read too

many novels. Once she had not thought such a thing possible, but the ache of loss had taught her differently. She had gotten her hopes up. She never would again. And she had left behind anything that caused the pain of too much feeling. Something her father had not been able to do. Besides, she had no wish to fit into such a tight, confining space as someone who could be his.

In all arguments, she was beneath him in the eyes of society. She did not fit in the echelons of the ton. She never would. And much to her good fortune did she wish to. Truly. But he hadn't even bothered to write her a letter. No doubt, he was no longer capable of articulate thought. No doubt, brandy and being a lord had addled his brains. She had read a few decent things about him, but nothing particularly good. No, she had read far more about his activities with ladies in the gambling halls and clubs, along with his propensity to go to the theater and act out in masked dramas, spending lavishly on parties and fun.

In short, he was a confirmed rake.

She ground her teeth, ignoring the ache in her heart. He was a disappointment to her. He had been full of promise, like her father, but like all rakes, he was no doubt going to end in dissipation, sin, sorrow, and never living up to his potential. So she paused.

It was true, he was a rake, but he had been her friend, and most importantly, he had access to the club. Her brain began to tick along with a sudden idea humming into fruition. Much to her astonishment, she caught sight of him slipping out the front door of the club, and she found herself stepping into the shadows of the side of the building.

Heavens, he was beautiful, well over six feet, with thick hair that playfully teased his beautiful face. Even from here, she could see his flashing blue eyes above carved cheeks like a Michelangelo, with granite perfection. Clothed in tailored items that would likely feed several families for a year, his body was hard, large, which irritated her because rakes generally, in her experience, were not chiseled perfection. They were paunchy and given to a certain look of exhaustion from too many late nights.

He did not appear exhausted or debauched. As a matter of fact, he had the same sort of zesty glow her brother had at six a.m. when he was about to go on one of his twenty-mile walks. Though she was rather convinced her brother's exceptionally long forays were meant to keep himself in firm control, lest he go the way of dissolution like their father. She doubted Derby was on a firm regimen to stay on the path of righteous.

Even so, the Earl of Derby looked as if he was ready to take on the world, and the world had best pay attention. She cleared her throat as she noted the way his ivory breeches clung to legs that reminded her of tree trunks. His shoulders were broad under his rich black cloak and appeared as capable as those of Atlas. He headed out to his coach quickly, which was only but a few feet from the entry door.

A footman, in scarlet livery, jumped down and opened the door for him. The earl easily climbed in. The door was shut quickly, and the footman leaped back into place. She was surprised he was leaving alone. Most of the gentlemen had been leaving with a barely clad lady, or two, on their arms, sparkling with jewels, giggling.

She stared at the coach. It would take a few moments for it to get away, for the streets around here were so packed with departing nobles. But then she realized this was the perfect opportunity. As the coach pulled away from the pavement, making its precarious way into the street, she made her decision. Rose inched out of the shadows, and carefully and as quietly as possible in the dark night, she headed toward the coach.

There was only one thing to do, and she was going to do it. She was going to get Alex to help her.

Chapter Three

Alex threw himself back onto the silk squabs of his elegantly appointed coach and let out a contented sigh. It had been a particularly good evening at the club. He had not come with the same reason so many others of his ilk did. He wasn't interested in attaining a young lady for the night or a mistress. He wasn't interested in gambling, either, but he had danced every dance, drank exquisite champagne, and listened to particularly good music. He had avoided the gaming tables. He always did.

Even he, who was quite lucky at games of chance, found them to be rather tiresome states of affair, and he hated seeing the looks on young men's faces as they lost more than they should, or the ladies, too, who gambled so much. One could see their slender, bejeweled hands tense on the table as they realized that they were going to have to tell their keeper how much they had gone into debt that night and what they would have to do to get out of it.

No, he had been interested in other states of affairs. The young violinist who had played for the entire room that night was under his patronage. Recently, he had made certain that the young man had an apartment, food, and clothes, and a large allowance so he might live without fear, without the desperation so many musicians had of going from work to work, hoping all would be well when debt and sickness likely waited.

Alex was making certain this young musician could thrive, that his genius could be admired by the great politicians and lords of the day, and eventually the violinist would be so important he'd be playing before large concert halls all over Europe, never concerned again. Alex was grateful he could do it. He'd also managed to convince three other lords to set up a house in Cornwall as a writer's retreat.

The first person to take it would be the young writer, Norton Wildcot, a promising young man who wrote, with particularly scathing ability, on the

problems of the West Indies and the great sins taking place there that were a blight on all humanity. Now, Wildcot would be able to write that year without fear of starvation. He would have coal to keep himself warm. Ink, paper, quills. Yes, Wildcot would be able to write without being driven to desperation, without being driven into the darkness that so many writers met or kept away from the overconsumption of things like alcohol or laudanum when the darkness grew too deep.

Alex paid particular care to those under his watch because he had seen that darkness before, how it crept into artists' lives. He didn't know why it seemed to be more so with them, but it did. And so he was protective of those with flames that could light the halls of history with their magnificence. Or be snuffed out by sorrows and brandy. It felt like a rather grandiose belief, but it was true, and he was proud today for the work that had been done.

Alex closed his eyes. It was exhausting sometimes, smiling, making everyone feel good about themselves, to encourage more people to be of help, but it was his life's work. And, of course, there was his seat in Parliament. Everyone was certain that all he cared about were a laugh and wine and the ladies. He cared about all those things. They were the joys of life. But he also cared deeply about the beauty of existence and how it could be remembered, and how he could protect the people who chronicled the histories in many mediums.

As he closed his eyes and let his head drift back, ready to nap for a little bit before he went to the next party, he let out another sigh. This time, not quite so content. He felt hollow. It was a strange sensation that had been coming to him as of late. His dear friend the Duke of Ashbridge, one of his true friends, had married and left for the Americas. He would come back, but Alex still felt the loss of it. With the American Duke, he'd felt a sense of belonging. And just as he was about to castigate himself for such self-pity, the coach door swung open, exposing the London night, and someone bolted inside. His eyes snapped open. He grabbed the person and threw them across to the other bench. Alex landed atop them and pressed his body down. He had no idea what this person was doing in his coach, but whoever it was was female. He could feel that from the curves writhing against him underneath his own hard body.

He reached for the person's hands, checking for weapons. He patted them down quickly, keeping himself on track as he briskly traced her ribs and hips and the curves that might bear a knife. No, no knives, no pistol.

“Get off,” the young woman growled with surprising force underneath him. He tensed. The voice was familiar, but he could not place it.

“Get off, Alex,” she demanded again.

He jolted in surprise. “Do I know you?” He had known many young women over the years. Was it possible someone had come to him and he had not helped them? Had he done someone wrong and they were here to attack him? He was not generally attacked. He was well-liked and beloved by most. He made certain of it with his work. And yet, anything could happen.

He lifted himself slightly and gazed down at the face as the coach stuttered to a halt. He could feel his footmen jump down from his position as the vehicle swayed underneath the change in weight. Alex blinked at the face beneath his, at the dirt smudged on the cheeks and the piercing blue eyes staring up at him. “Rose?”

She arched a magnificent brow. “Exactly, you clod. Now get off me.”

But he did not. He lingered for a moment, unwilling to let her go just yet. His footman thrust his head in.

“My lord.”

“Everything is fine, Jenkins. It is an old friend. Go on back up top and slam the door shut.”

Jenkins did exactly as he was told. And the coach began to roll on.

“What are you doing?” He eased his hold but did not pull back. He had not seen Rose in years, and he certainly had never held her, not like this. It felt too perfect. And he knew he was a cad for doing it. But after all this time, he was afraid to let her go, as if she might slip through his fingers like smoke, as if he was imagining it all. Was he dreaming? Had he closed his eyes and allowed himself to bring her to life like some magic creature in his mind?

“You are pinching my back,” she said.

He groaned and climbed back. He tsked as he settled into his seat. “Then you shouldn’t throw yourself into a gentleman’s coach. You’re quite lucky it was mine.” Then he paused and groaned again. “You knew it was mine.”

“Excellent deduction,” she drawled. “Of course I knew it was yours, Alex. Do you think I’d throw myself into any old man’s coach?”

Alex. Bloody hell, he loved the sound of his name on her pert lips. “Well, one doesn’t know with behavior like that,” he said. “And I have heard you’ve done some shocking things over the last few years.”

“Oh, you’ve heard about me, have you?” She sat up and straightened her clothes.

“I have indeed,” he said, realizing he shouldn’t admit he had been following her escapades over the years. And aiding her in whatever ways he could, from secretly suggesting she be chosen for certain pamphlets, to nudging her publishers to give her larger remuneration, to occasionally making certain those who might wish her ill will understood that any action on such wishes might lead to a long, permanent swim in the Thames.

He did not want her to know he had followed her. He certainly did not wish her, proud soul that she was, to know how much he had secretly helped her over the years. And he damn well did not want her to know that she had been an ever-present person in the back of his mind, like a ghost or specter, haunting him, with a whole other life, of a way that things could have been before. Well, it wasn’t good to think of the past. “What are you doing? That was bloody dangerous.”

She pursed her lips. “I have a need. And if one has a need, they should be willing to act upon it.”

“You have a need to be in a coach alone with me? Your brother will kill us both.” And the image of having to confess he’d broken his vow to Harry flashed before him. It was not a pleasant image. Evisceration came to mind, verbally and physically. He repressed a shudder.

A knowing smile tilted her lips before she returned easily, “No, he won’t kill me. He’ll kill you.”

He rolled his eyes. “Well, that’s accurate. And you’re willing to put my life at risk?”

“Yes,” she said, “because I can see you’d handle yourself just fine.”

He laughed. “Why? Because I’m able to throw you against the coach bench?”

“You have good reflexes,” she said with a grin. “Besides, I don’t think he’d kill you. He might maim you a bit, and he has excellent judgment. He’d realize the extent of the damage that could occur. Killing an earl will result in Tyburn, even if one is a vicar.”

“Well, that’s the truth.” And the fact was lords were rarely hanged, but men like her brother could be hanged every day. Harry was not important enough to be spared from the noose, unlike a lord like Alex. He thrust a hand through his hair, exasperated. “Still, it must be desperate for you to be here.”

“I’m glad you realize that. I need your help.”

He leaned forward. “My help?”

She shrugged as if it was all so obvious. “You are the only lord that I can

trust. The rest are nefarious fools.”

He cocked his head to the side, uncertain if he was meant to be insulted or flattered. “So what is it you think I can do for you that would cause you to fling yourself into my moving equipage?”

She cleared her throat. “I was sitting in a puddle outside the club trying to figure out how to gain admittance. And then you came along.”

He gaped for a moment. “I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me, Alex.”

“I did. But it is incredibly farfetched.”

She snorted, a shockingly delightful sound. “Life is farfetched.”

“A point to you.”

“Anyway,” she carried on as if she had not been interrupted, “I spotted your coach, and I felt it was more than simple coincidence. Surely, serendipity is at play!”

He scowled, wishing their meeting had been serendipitous for other reasons than him being used for his title. “I would’ve felt that someone of your ilk wouldn’t believe in serendipity.”

“I rather think serendipity is possible. I haven’t given up entirely on the hope of good things or that they can come.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” he said. “From some of the articles I’ve read—”

“You read my articles?” she queried, her brows arching with surprise as her prickly stance softened a bit.

He’d read all of them, and her novels, too. And her pamphlets. Telling her would do neither of them any good, not if he didn’t want Harry to die of conniptions. He closed his mouth and folded his arms across his chest and then turned the conversation. “Tell me why you are here and why in God’s name you want to gain admittance into that club. They’ll never let you in.”

“They won’t. Not without help.” And her brows waggled.

At that damned playful look, he nearly expired on the spot. It did something to him. Something that burned through his veins. Something that whispered to him that he’d like to play with her in more ways than one. And he also knew exactly what she was hoping for as if her thoughts had been poured into his brain. How? How could he know her so well after so long? “No,” he pronounced firmly, lifting his hands as one of the bear baiters might have done in Shakespeare’s day.

Her mouth dropped open. “Why ever not?”

He leaned further forward and gritted. “Because you don’t belong in a

place like that, Rose.”

“A place like what?”

He choked on a lurid, descriptive reply. He wouldn't be dragged into such a discussion with her. A discussion he'd relive again, and one that would warrant Harry maiming him. “A place of sin.”

“There, you've declared it! It is a place of sin.” She gave him a triumphant smile as if he had just argued her case for her. “So it's exactly where I should go to write about it.”

As he realized her intentions, he felt his insides twist. He placed his fingers to his temples and closed his eyes. “Rose, you are not going to get in there and write about it. The most horrible things could happen to you if they find out what you are doing.”

“Like challenged?”

How the bloody hell could he put it? “Well, you could be thrown in jail. You could be—”

“That's not the most horrible thing that could happen to a young woman, not in our society. Do you think me a fool?”

He snapped open his eyes and met her gaze. Her eyes were ablaze with determination. She knew exactly the potential consequences of her choices. It was what made her so brave, so bold, so admirable. “Rose,” he began, his voice rough to his own ears. “This is risky, even for your—”

Her body tensed. “I need to get in there.”

“Why?” He was desperate to understand and keep her safe.

She bit her lower lip and looked to the window as if she could not quite face her own reply. But then she turned back to him, and her voice, deep with emotion, filled the coach. “Because more people need to know what happens to people who throw their lives away. And if you don't help me, I'll find someone else who will.”

That statement laced through him with terrifying dread. He studied her fierce frame and the passion in her gaze. “You mean it, don't you?”

“Oh, yes,” she said, folding her arms just beneath her primly covered bosom. “Absolutely.”

He felt his spirit sink because Rose was a woman of her word. She never said anything she didn't mean. Much to his horror, he realized, if he did not help her, she was going to find someone else to help her. Someone else who might hurt her. Someone else who might, well, act like a rake.

And he was a rake, but he was not like many of the rakes that filled

London's ton. He would never hurt a woman, but many men who visited the demimonde would. And he could not bear the idea of Rose ever being harmed.

She'd suffered enough. So he knew, before another word could be spoken, that he would do anything she asked. Anything to keep her safe. But then there was his promise to her brother that he would not go within ten feet of her. And here he was, but three feet away, the tips of their boots all but brushing.

He wondered if he was already sliding into hell, breaking his word.

Chapter Four

Rose could not shake the feel of his body atop hers from her thoughts. Even now, she felt as if she could feel his hard sinew and muscle pressed to hers even though he now sat three feet across from her.

Oh, how strange it had felt! How wonderful and captivating and intimidating all at once, the way his body had enveloped hers. The scent of citrus and leather and spice had filled her senses, doing things to her belly and her body that she'd not ever experienced. And when he had lifted his head and gazed down into her eyes, it was all she could do to make a retort, and a retort really did seem the best option, lest she make some foolish, girlish sound.

It would've been one of astonishment, one at how remarkably beautiful he was, one at how he made her feel strange. Alive. A whisper of something quite odd danced through her middle. She shoved it aside. No, the only way to deal with this was to remember that he was a rake and her friend, and Alex was her brother's friend.

Yes, he was not a mere man. He was the Earl of Derby. He was Alex. And as he sat on the bench, his boots but a few inches from her own shoes, she surveyed him. The years had made him better, not worse. He was stronger, the line of his jaw hard, his eyes calculating and yet, as they gazed upon her, curious. He was not ready to throw her out of the coach, which she was deeply grateful for. She wasn't entirely certain what he would do. But he was gazing at her as if she had lost her wits, true. He was also gazing at her as if he was stuck in the middle of a storm and could not get out.

She almost laughed at that, but she realized she was the storm, and he was most perplexed to be in it. She could tell it was on the tip of his tongue to say yes. "So you will help me?"

"I have no choice."

She longed to reply that there was always a choice, but such a reply was not in her best interest. She kept that to herself. "How will you get me in?"

"There's only one way, Rose," he rumbled.

"And what is that?" she asked, tilting her head to the side.

"You're going to have to pretend to be my mistress."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're going to have to pretend to be my mistress," he repeated, "and then I'll be able to get you into the club and into any other event you like."

She sat a little straighter, not quite sure what to make of his suggestion. "Don't you have a mistress at present?"

"No," he said honestly, and she found herself shifting on the seat, not quite certain how she felt about that. She did not want to admit to herself that there was a little wave of relief dancing through her. "Ah, I see. Someone couldn't handle the job, was it?"

He laughed. "I am not that difficult. I'm a rather pleasant person to be around."

"All men think such things."

"No, they don't," he replied. "Believe you me, I know a great many men who know how difficult they are, but I do my best to be affable."

"Do you?" she queried, suspicious.

"I haven't changed that much, Rose," he said softly.

She wondered at that. She had cared for him so dearly when they were children. He had always been there for her when the world got dark, when things were hard, and they had shared a great love of reading together and adventures.

It still made her angry that they had drifted apart, that he had left her, that he had had to go into the world of men and leave her behind in the world of women, one she had not wanted to be in, and so she had done everything she could to climb her way out of it. "I don't think I can masquerade as your mistress."

"Why ever not?"

She raked her hand up and down her body. "Look at me."

He did as instructed. His gaze roved over her face and then her body, as if he would memorize every bit of her. He frowned. "What should I see, the mud stains?"

"No, not that!" she huffed.

"Then what?"

“I am not—”

“You’re beautiful.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m terse and prickly.”

“Just like a rose,” he said.

“Yes,” she replied. “But if you make mention of my thorns—”

“Oh, Rose,” he said, “your thorns have always been the best part about you.”

She paused. Did he mean that or was he making fun of her? She could not entirely tell. “Can you not get me a position, perhaps as a servant in that place?”

“No,” he said. “You will never pass as a servant. And the truth is, Rose, you won’t get to see what you wish if you’re a servant. You’ll be downstairs most of the time until you pass muster.”

“Oh,” she said, deflated, “that’s rather difficult.”

“The best way is for you to come with me where I can protect you.”

“Protect me? I’m very capable, you know.”

“I don’t doubt it,” he said. “But if you want to hear close conversation, you’ll need to be on my arm to truly see the way things work. Otherwise, if you’re lucky, you might get a position as a maid passing wine from place to place, but you’ll only hear snippets of things. And worse, there will be hands that grab at you.”

“Hands?” She narrowed her gaze. “Aren’t there mistresses aplenty in that place?”

“Yes,” he affirmed. “But, unfortunately, there’s a certain sort of gentleman who feels the help are the same as the buffet table. They are there to be grabbed.”

“Oh, dear,” she said, frowning as a wave of unpleasant possibility raced through her. “I am not surprised, but I find it rather repulsive.”

“That’s because it is repulsive.”

“And yet you go along with these people.”

He drew in a long breath. “I go along with those people, Rose, because they are the most powerful people in the land, and one must rub shoulders with them if one hopes to make any sort of change. Besides...”

“What?” she challenged.

“The music is good, the dancing is sublime, and the conversation is stellar.”

“Aside from the grabbing hands,” she said.

“Do you not know anyone in your circle that has grabbing hands?”

“That’s fair. I do not think I know of a circle that does not have someone with grabbing hands.”

“There,” he said, though he was not happy about it. “We can all do the best we can to stop it, but it does seem to be prevalent around the world.”

“Men are most difficult creatures,” she said.

“I won’t argue with that point. Do you think we’re all devils?”

“No. My brother is a wonderful fellow.”

“He is. He’s going to kill me,” he said again.

She laughed. “Only if he finds out.”

“You want me to lie to him?”

“Do you see him often?”

He narrowed his gaze. “Yes, Rose, I do.”

“Do you?” she said, her heart sinking. She had no idea. Her brother never mentioned him. She wondered why. “How often?”

“Once a week when he’s in London. We box,” he said. “I try to get him to go out, but he won’t.”

“Of course he won’t,” she said firmly. “He’s chosen a most stoic life. It keeps him on the straight and narrow.”

His face softened. “And does he need to be on the straight and narrow?”

Her mouth thinned into a line. “You know that he does, what with Papa’s reputation.”

“And you,” he said, his voice a low rumble. “Do you need to be on the straight and narrow?”

She did not know how to reply to that. She had lived a careful life. She did not do things that could get her into the gossips. Oh, it was true, she went where young ladies did not go, but she had not had an affair. There were no young men in her life. She did not gamble. She did not drink. But in her heart, in her deepest heart, she longed for the wildness of emotion, of poetry.

She scribbled late into the night sometimes, letting her feelings out upon the page. She felt so much it terrified her. The depth of it sometimes roared through her like a summer storm, pounding rain and thunder and lightning. Still, she could not give in. She could never give in to it. Such roads led the way her father had gone, for he had had his passions, too, and he had given way to them. If he had just held on, if he had just kept himself in check, he could have been a great artist, and the world would have known his name.

No one knew his name now, except the doctors and the people who made

certain that he could not leave Lock Asylum. She looked away.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I did not mean to hurt you.”

She shrugged. “You did not. Words cannot hurt anyone. I hurt myself by thinking of the past. It has made me who I am, and I am immensely grateful for that. And I am grateful for you, too.” She blew out a breath. “So I am to go as your mistress. Do you think the butler will recognize me? He threw me out, you know.”

His eyes widened. “Is that where all the mud came from?”

She winced. “Indeed. I was closely acquainted with the puddle at his hands.”

“I’m going to have to speak to him,” he ground out.

“No, you’re not,” she said tersely. “We mustn’t draw attention to me again.”

His lips curved in a slow smile. “By the time I’m done with you, no one will recognize you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Oh, I think you know,” he murmured. “You’ve always been a clever young woman.”

“Oh, God,” she said, “are you going to dress me like a doll?”

“Do you want me to?” he asked softly. It should have been an innocent statement, referring to the fact that he was going to show her what to wear and how to act. But because he was a rake, those words sounded like sin. And she, for one horrifying moment, envisioned him taking off her clothes rather than putting new ones on. But she swiftly pushed it away because she did not allow herself to have such thoughts.

She did not allow herself to dance with temptation. Temptation was dangerous. Passion led to sin, and sin led to... She stared at him, at his eyes, and wondered if she’d made a bad decision indeed. She pounded on the coach roof. “Can you meet me tomorrow at nine in the morning? To begin making me unrecognizable?”

“Does it have to be so early?”

She let out a laugh. “Early?”

“Fine, Rose.” He sighed. “Nine it is. But what are you—”

The coach slowed to a halt, and she grinned at him. “This is my part of town. I’ll send a card over with my address. Until the morning, Alex.” And with that, she shoved the door open and slipped out into the night.

She felt him gaping behind her, and she rather enjoyed leaving him

flummoxed. But as she headed into the thick crowd around Cavendish Square, her heart began to pound. Masquerade as his mistress. It felt dangerous, and not because of the club, but being so near him.

But it would be worth it. It had to be.

If she could help but one person, all this would be worth it.

Chapter Five

Alexander charged out into the night after his father. Alexander grabbed his father's shoulder, gripping the great coat with a frantic grasp. "Papa, please stop. I beg you."

His father whirled around, his eyes hard. The stars shone above, casting a silvery glow upon them, but it turned his father to steel in the light.

"Please," Alexander begged again. "They are my friends."

The image of Rose by her mother, her face awash with growing terror at being cast out into the world with no anchor, caused his stomach to turn.

"Friends?" his father mocked, his lip curling. "Do not be pathetic, boy. 'Friends' denotes equals. They are not your equals. They are beneath you in every single way."

"You cannot mean that, Father," Alexander rasped, dropping his hand, for his shoulder was rigid, unyielding.

"I absolutely mean it," his father stated. "We are born to privilege, my son. You are my heir. We are born to wealth. We are born to greatness, and we must appreciate it." His father paused, his eyes narrowing. "And if you believe they are your equal, you disrespect that. Your friends were born low. We were born to give patronage and employment to such, but Mr. Digby has violated our trust. And so they have thrown off our protection. No—"

"But my friends did not, Papa," he cut in, determined not to give in. Not yet. "Please. Please. Rose and Harry—"

"Rose and Harry are the children of a wastrel," his father ground out. "No doubt soon it'll become clear how very evident that is. Your friends will, no doubt, behave in the same ways."

He swallowed at the hideous and unfair pronouncement. "Papa, please. Rose is..."

A different look crossed his father's face now, and his eyes grew hard.

“What about Rose?” he challenged coldly.

His heart began to pound, and his breath grew short. He had to say it. He had to dare. “Papa, I think I...”

Without warning, his father grabbed him by the shoulders and looked at him with a terrifying ferocity. “Do not say it. Do not utter such drivel in my presence.” He released him then in sharp movements, smoothing Alexander’s coat as he continued. “And I’m going to tell you something now, Alexander. You will leave them be. You will have nothing more to do with them. And if I find out that you are speaking with them, seeing them, or if you give your regard to Rose Digby, I will destroy them utterly.”

The words bitten out were a vow. Alexander hid his horror at his father’s warning, for he realized now that if he defended them, he put them in danger.

“You can never have her, boy,” his father gritted, and then he snorted. “Unless you wish to make her your mistress, of course, because that is the sort of person she is. She’s only good for that. You must let them go. The father is appalling in his behavior, a drunkard, a lecher. His art cannot make up for that. I wish it could, but it can’t. Now pull yourself together and remember who you are.”

And with that, his father whirled away and strode toward his stallion. He mounted up quickly and waited, waited for Alexander to join him, waited for him to abandon his friends. He knew his father would keep his word. He knew there was nothing else he could say in this moment. And he felt powerless and weak and unworthy of his friends. Unworthy of Rose.

He would never be worthy of her because he did not have the strength to stop his father in this moment. He did not have the power. He knew he should do whatever it took, but he was more afraid of his father now, afraid of what his father could do, do to Rose and her family. And it shook through him, twisting his insides.

So he crossed to his own horse, mounted up, and rode into the night. Rose’s name pounded through his head, just as the stallion’s hooves pounded the ground. And the ache? The pain of being severed from her tore through him all at once. It was a pain he would never forget, a pain that coursed through him, and suddenly he screamed her name to the night.

Alexander shot up in bed, sweat pouring off him. He had not thought of that night, the night his father had cast the Digbys out with nothing, in years. The death of his father had liberated him in so many things, but not in his shame, not in his feelings of unworthiness, not in his certainty that he would

never be good enough for Rose because he had been a coward, because he had not managed to make his father see.

Yes, he had been a boy. But that was no excuse, was it? No. He wiped a hand over his tired face. Seeing Rose today, that was what had awakened this memory, this brutal feeling inside him, this knowledge that he could never have her. For it felt as if his father's ghost had managed to find its way through Rose's brother at Oxford and the vow he'd made to his friend.

He could never have her. His father had made that clear. Now, Harry had made that clear. And he had to remember that. He forced himself to lie back in his bed, to slow his breathing, and to slip away from the pain of the past.

• • •

“Mr. Digby is here to see you, my lord.”

Alex shot up in bed, his heart slamming against his ribs. “Does he have a pistol?”

His butler, Price, cocked his head to the side, looking as imperious as he always did, wise and capable, and drawled, “Not that I could see, my lord, but Mr. Digby is always an impressive person. He looks as if he could defend himself quite capably without a pistol, if you must know. Have you done something to upset him?”

He had known Price all his life. The man had been his father's butler, but they had had a relationship that was quite different than the one that his father had had with Price. Price had snuck Alex sweets as a child, taken him out fishing, and been kind to him in ways that his father had not done. So he rather saw Price as an uncle more than a butler, which might sound mad to most people of the ton, for the idea of having a servant be close to one was impossible. But not impossible for him. It did allow Price to say things that most butlers would never say. Alex pulled himself up against his pillows. “Send him up, then.”

Hargave looked askance. “To your bedchamber, my lord? Or would you prefer to come downstairs? He looks as if he is ready to bolt like a colt in spring.”

Alex tensed. “Oh God, I'll wager he's here to either kill me or take me for a long walk.”

“I'm thinking the long walk, my lord. He seems rather chipper to do murder.”

“Well, that's good,” he said. “I don't fancy dying yet.”

Price gave him a quick nod. "Shall I tell him you're coming down?"

"Yes." And with that, he threw his feet over the side of his bed, tossed the covers back, and stood.

Price whirled around and headed for the door.

"Oh, and Price," Alex called. "Please have a cup of coffee waiting for me. I can't face Digby without coffee, adore him as I do."

"Absolutely, my lord," Price said. "And you'll need it if he's going to take you on one of his walks."

Alex headed to the basin of water, which was always waiting for him, splashed himself with cold water, then unceremoniously pulled on his clothes. Price wasn't wrong. Digby was a dedicated walker. The man had walked Hadrian's Wall in record time last fall and trained rigorously every day. Seventy miles was nothing to Digby. And while he felt he was in good condition, seventy miles was still significant to himself.

With a few hours of sleep under his belt, Alex bounded down the stairs, determined to meet Digby as if nothing was amiss, because if Digby was about to kill him, he at least wouldn't go with hat in hand. He hurried down to the foyer.

Digby stood at the door like a wolfhound eager to head out on the hunt. "I've come to take you out."

"Digby," Alex exclaimed. "I did not know you were in London."

Digby grinned. "I've come to see my sister, but I'm staying with the bishop."

"Very grand," he said, but he still felt off foot, uncertain as to what Digby might know regarding Rose. "And your sister is perfectly content with the scheme? Would she not prefer you lodging with her?"

"Rose would loathe me staying with her," Digby replied easily. "She's an independent creature with a tidy sum of her own with her writing. I see her every day, though. We take tea together, and I take her on a walk."

Alex wondered what Rose thought of that. Was Rose as good a walker as her brother? And it did not escape him that Harry took more than one long walk a day.

"Have you seen Rose?" Harry abruptly asked.

"Why do you ask?" he said, a wave of anxiety suddenly rushing through him.

Harry hesitated. "Well, I was thinking perhaps it has been too long since the two of you have been each other's company, and we should all get

together for tea or a walk.”

“I sense a theme.”

Digby grinned. “I like routine. It keeps me on the straight and narrow.”

There it was again, that straight-and-narrow idea. Well, he could understand. After the decimation of Digby’s father’s life, rules could help.

“Let’s go,” Harry declared.

Alex was tempted to whimper but was saved such indignities as Price rushed out with cup of coffee in hand. Alex guzzled it down, hoping he wouldn’t regret the sudden influx of caffeine, but he doubted it. His constitution was quite strong.

Digby shook his head. “You should give it up, man. Being reliant on anything is terrible for one’s spirit. Now, off we go.” And with that, they headed out onto the pavement.

“Where are you taking me?” Alex dared to ask, half dreading the answer. He feared Scotland was a possibility.

“Oh, I thought somewhere out past Hampstead Heath, perhaps past Richmond even.”

“Digby, you know I’m not—”

“Come on. Come on,” Digby urged, picking up his stride. “Don’t waste your breath.”

Digby hurdled down the street out toward the west, where the city met the country. Alex’s house was closer to St. James’s Park, one of the newer houses, but still in the most select area. They headed out of the city fast, passing its newest construction of gilded homes pressed up against fields. These parts and the parks were so affluent now and full of the wealthiest members of the ton. But at this hour, only devoted riders were out. None of the set that loved to show off their coaches and clothes had yet made it out of bed. They were scraping themselves up off the floor, most of them from the ball before. Still, he rather admired Digby’s determination.

“You seem a bit odd this morning,” Digby said at last. “You’re not usually so reticent when you see me.”

“Am I reticent?” he asked, trying to keep his tone light.

Digby laughed. “You usually immediately begin regaling me with tales of London.”

“Should I?” He wondered now if that was a bit insensitive, given Harry’s history and his work to eschew the trappings of society.

“Well, if you’d like to,” Harry said. “I do enjoy your conversation. It’s like

a glimpse into a world that I'll never be part of.”

“One that you abhor.”

“I don't abhor it. It's simply not for me. And I worry for you.”

“I'm perfectly capable of keeping myself on my own straight and narrow.”

Digby swung a suspicious gaze at him. “Are you? Are you truly? You are not married, and you don't have an heir.”

“Bloody hell,” he growled, climbing over a felled log. “Have you come to London on behest of my grandmother to tell me to get married and have an heir?”

They tromped through the high grass of the fields coming out past Hampstead.

“Perhaps,” Harry said carefully. “Your grandmother does not like me. You know that.”

“She doesn't dislike you. She simply—”

Harry snorted. “Yes?”

He cursed himself. He never should have mentioned his grandmother. “The business with your father, she can't get over it.”

Harry's Adonis-like face darkened. “I don't blame her. I can't get over it, either. Neither can Rose. No one can who knew him.”

It was true. A great deal of his mission to help artists came from the fate of Rose and Harry's father. Still, he thought it rather unkind that his grandmother refused to meet with either of them, calling them “the children of that man.”

The truth was his own father wasn't that much different in the end. Oh, he hadn't ended up in the Lock Asylum. He hadn't ruined his wife or his son's life, but he had not paid them much attention when deep in his cups or with his mistresses or at his gaming tables. And it was rather lucky he hadn't gambled away more fortune than he had. Still, Alex wasn't going to follow that path if he could help it. He was choosing the more beautiful sides of his life, not dissipation but enjoyment.

No matter what anyone said about him, he had no desire to hurt anyone. He just wanted to love life and see the beauty in it and to help people if he could.

Harry's face darkened further. “I'm worried about my sister.”

“Are you?”

Harry frowned. “Yes. I think she's getting involved with some things she shouldn't, but if I get involved myself, she'll become angry with me.”

His whole body felt taut with his deception. “Do you have any ideas about

assisting her?”

Harry let out an exasperated sigh. “I don’t know,” he said. “It’s impossible with her. She is a determined soul, you know, and she doesn’t like interference.”

“Rose?” he drawled, unable to help himself. “Who’d have thought it?”

Harry laughed, though the sound wasn’t altogether humorous.

A wave of memory crashed over Alex, and a smile tilted his lips. He couldn’t stop himself. “She was always bossing us around, wasn’t she, when we were children?”

“I’m surprised she isn’t the Prime Minister of England.”

“It might have to do with the fact that she’s a woman.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Yes. And not of important enough birth.”

“I could help,” he suddenly blurted.

Harry threw him a dangerous glance. “Help? How?”

“Well, I have influence and power,” he said innocently.

“No, you don’t need to help my sister. Not someone like you.” Harry shook his head firmly.

There it was again. The thought laced through him; he couldn’t have her. And that he’d never truly be loved for himself because he wasn’t worthy of love. And certainly not her love. “Exactly what does that mean?”

“You’re my best friend, and I care about you very much,” Harry began. “But we’ve been over it in Oxford. I don’t need to repeat it.”

“You said I wasn’t to go within ten feet of her.”

“You do remember,” Harry said. “Old man, it’s even more true now. Your reputation as a rake is solidified. Everyone knows you love other men’s wives, and mistresses, and questionable parties.” He slowed for a moment and locked gazes with him. “Stay away from her.”

And then his friend was off again, winding up the hill toward the forests. Dear God, was Harry playing him for a fool? Did he know about the meeting between himself and his sister? Was he waiting to see if he... No, Harry wasn’t like that. Harry didn’t tell lies. Harry didn’t deceive. He was a man with a pure heart and great honor. And here Alex was, deceiving his friend moment by moment. Harry was right. He should stay away from her. He wasn’t worthy of her, but someone had to protect her, and it was clear her brother wasn’t up to the task.

Alex would damn well do it, even if he had to lie to his dearest friend. He didn’t know if Harry would ever forgive him if he found out. Probably not.

Maybe he truly would call him out.

Someone had to protect Rose, and against his word to his friend, that someone was going to be him.

Chapter Six

“Mama,” Rose urged, her voice on edge, nearing frantic, but she did everything that she could to keep it calm. “I insist you eat.” Her mother turned her face to the window, which looked out on a dirty, terrible street in one of the rougher parts of London.

Rose’s spirit sank. Her mother’s hair was braided and coiled about her head, but only because Rose had done it herself. If it had been left up to her mother, she would’ve done nothing. She would’ve allowed it to tangle, to twist, to tumble about her shoulders in dank, thick swaths.

Her gown barely fit anymore. It hung on a frame that was far too thin, and Rose’s heart ached at the sight of it. She took the spoon, dipped into the bowl, scooping the thin stuff, and brought it toward her mother. “Mama, I beg of you, eat.”

But, again, her mother did not look back over her shoulder. She stared silently out at the window as she always did now, as if there was some answer there, as if out on the street beyond the City of London there was the key to their misfortune and the misery. There was no key, there was no answer, and there was no rescue coming. Nothing was going to save them from this. Her father was dead, died in the Lock Asylum, died from debauchery and pain. Her heart twisted, and she lowered the spoon.

Tears threatened to spill down her cheeks, but she would not allow them to fall. No, she would be strong. She had to be strong. She had to be strong for her mother. And so she slipped her hands to her mother’s and enveloped it, trying to warm it, trying to pull her mother back to her. “Mama, all will be well, I promise.”

Her mother turned back and blinked, the lines about her mouth tightening. “All will be well?” she echoed. “Nothing will ever be well again. Your father is dead, and all I want...”

Her mother's voice died off, and her eyes were two tormented orbs, pain haunting them. Her mother turned back to the window, and Rose could not draw breath as a heavy weight settled over her, for she feared she knew what her mother wanted. She feared her mother was going to will herself to death, and there was nothing Rose would be able to do to stop her.

Rose sucked in a shuddering breath and forced herself to stand, forced herself to go to the door. She had to work. She had to act. There had to be something she could do. And yet what could she do in the face of so much suffering?

Well, she would never let herself succumb to emotion or indulgence, for that way lay the suffering of her mother. She would never fall in love with a man like her father. She would never allow herself to love a rake.

The memory nearly crushed her, for it swept in unannounced and unbidden. In fact, she had not let herself think of her mother in years. She couldn't. The pain was too great. But she knew why she'd remembered it this morning as she'd worked. Alexander was in her life again, and she couldn't forget what she had learned from her mother.

Rakes were not to be trusted. Indulgence and emotion led to destruction. And the rake was late. Typical. Rose grabbed her periwinkle painted teacup, took a long drink of the aromatic beverage, and plunked it down back in her saucer. It sloshed over the edge. Of course Derby was late. Why would she expect anything else from a man who indulged in self-pleasure? She scowled at her poor tea, which had done nothing to offend her.

No doubt, he was still asleep in his London townhouse, taking off the effects of a long night. After all, that's what rakes did, did they not? They stayed out till all hours dancing the night away, drinking champagne, and not thinking of the promises that they had made.

She picked up her quill and dashed a few lines across the page. Her handwriting was a scrawl, but fast. She had been quite efficient in her ability to produce words over the years, and this document did need to be done by the morrow if she wished to be paid and maintain her reputation for consistency and reliability. A reputation she dearly cherished.

She was almost completed. After all, she felt strongly about the displaced children around Covent Garden who begged for food and looked for scraps. The whole point of the article was not to shame the children, or even society, but to point out the challenges of such children who lived in hovels, often twelve, thirteen of them together, unable to trust each other for they were all

hungry and all in need. Still, half of London would argue that the workhouses and the orphan asylums were more than enough. She did not agree. She'd been to those places, and they were one step above hell. They meant the children might not die for they were fed, but not fed well, and their spirits were crushed beyond all possible comprehension. And deaths did occur, more often than the directors admitted.

It was no wonder most of the children did everything they could to escape at first opportunity, only to live a life of pickpocketing, crime, and other nefarious activities. The gallows awaited many. She scratched out another line, making the case for a fund to be developed that would allow these children to have an education, food, soup, clothes, anything that might keep them from falling into criminality. She longed to demand that society see that the whole of London—not just London, but England—would be better if these children were taken care of, if they could be raised to good trade, if they could be raised to have a place in society where they were not shamed and hated and treated as little better than rats.

She blew out a sigh. She often had wondered if she had half-brothers or half-sisters out in the world given her father's behavior. After all, that was the behavior of a rake, wasn't it? To plant his seeds all over the world and not give a thought about it or the consequences. She put her quill into her ink pot, sanded and blotted her page, then stretched her neck. Ink stained the spot between her forefinger and middle finger. She didn't even bother to rub at it. Why should she? It was a permanent mark, and one she was quite proud of.

She shoved her simple wood chair back, closed her eyes, and willed herself to calm. She could not allow herself to dwell in the mire of dark thoughts for long. If she did, she would accomplish nothing and would soon sink into a malaise or a melancholia. She had seen it in other people who did such work and wrote such articles. Gentlemen tended to turn to brandy, ladies to laudanum, and she had no desire to use either of those to escape from the realities of the world. She chose action, and sometimes she chose friends, reading, and writing poetry.

She turned toward the door. What was she going to do if he did not come? He had promised her that he would get her into the club. She propped her hands on her hips. She was simply going to have to take matters into her own hands, as she always did. She took a gray cloak from its hook on the wall and tossed it about her shoulders. She'd been dressed in her dove gray morning gown since five o'clock. Much like her brother, she was an early riser

determined to grab life by its horns and show it who was its master, rather than the other way about.

No victim was she. She headed for the door, and just as she opened it, she jumped back and let out a note of surprise. Derby stood there, his hand raised, about to knock.

She straightened her shoulders. "You're late."

"I am," he agreed with his oh-so-charming smile. "Can you forgive me?"

"No, not really."

He let out a low groan. "Bloody hell, Rose," he said. "Your standards are high, and I admire you for them, but will you not at least hear why I am late?"

She folded her hands before her. "I don't believe in excuses. They do no one any good. There can be reasons, of course, but it doesn't change the outcome."

He arched a brow. "Will you let me in?"

"Yes," she said, "because I still think that I can make use of you."

He snorted. "Always nice to know one can be used."

And she wondered at that. Was he used to being used? An earl with power, an affable one, but he seemed so carefree. Nothing troubled him. So of course not. She stepped back and jutted her hand out, indicating he should come inside. "I wouldn't choose just anyone," she said.

He laughed. "I'm glad you feel that way. I should hate to think that you're wandering off around England picking up any old earl who will help you."

She laughed, too. "I don't know that many aristocrats," she said. "And I think you know who."

"The Duchess of Ashbridge," he returned easily. "You wrote that piece for her."

"I did," she affirmed, a note of pride enriching her tone.

"It's quite handy. For it will be easier for you since I think that is exactly who we should use for your wardrobe."

"My wardrobe?" she echoed, her insides doing the strangest flip.

He arched that devilish brow again and raked his gaze up and down her, his brow furrowing as he took in her prim clothes. "You can't go to a club in those kinds of clothes, Rose."

He strode past her toward the fire. "Is there any tea in that pot?" he asked, pointing to the simple porcelain affair on her writing desk.

"Yes," she said, "but it's rather cold."

“I don’t care. I need it. Your brother nearly drove me half mad this morning. And to compound that, I was certain you would be furious with me for my tardiness.”

She tsked. “I am hardly furious.”

“No, you are not,” he agreed. “You are disdainful, which I actually think is worse.” He took up the teapot without invitation and poured himself tea into her cup. He picked it up and drank.

There was something odd about the gesture, something almost intimate, him drinking from her cup. Part of her wanted to be angry with him for taking possession of her chambers as if they were his, but she understood that an earl did that sort of thing almost everywhere he went. It was the infuriating trait of the upper class that they always felt they belonged wherever they went. Most people did not feel that.

As a matter of fact, most people went about their entire lives never quite feeling as if they belonged anywhere and never feeling good enough. He, of course, was completely self-possessed because, well, he was the Earl of Derby. He belonged everywhere. Wherever he went. His words hit her then, though, as he sipped the cold tea as if it was manna.

“Did you say my brother?” She nearly choked on the words in her disbelief.

“Yes. He arrived on my doorstep this morning, to my great horror.” He shuddered. “He’s my dearest friend, but I was convinced he somehow knew about our meeting.”

“Did he?”

He lowered the cup, his sensual lower lip traced with a sheen of tea. “No, unless he’s lying to me, which we know he never does.”

For some reason, she could not quite tear her gaze away from his lips. She forced herself to blink. “No, he does not lie,” she said. “So this is good. He’s not aware.”

“Is it really?” he demanded, placing the cup down gently in the saucer. “Is it really so good your brother does not know and that we are going to lie to him?”

“It’s for his own good,” she said, folding her arms just under her bosom.

“Why?” Derby asked, tensing. “Can we not just tell him the truth?”

She gave a sharp shake of her head. “He would hate it. He doesn’t want me to put myself at such risk.”

“Nor do I,” Derby said.

She rolled her eyes. “Men are foolish creatures. Life is full of risk, Derby. You can’t protect me from it. I could be accosted almost anywhere, not just in pursuit of my article.”

A low growl, surely not... But yes, a low growl rumbled from his throat. “I cannot argue. I know that such things happen even at balls, but I don’t have to like deceiving your brother.”

“I wouldn’t tolerate you if you liked it,” she said. “This is merely a necessity. I do deceive him more often than he would like, but it keeps him content.”

“Tolerate. Marvelous.” He narrowed his gaze. “Are you going to lie to everyone to keep them content?”

She stilled at that. “Possibly. You see, women have to do all sorts of things to get things done, and sometimes that’s keeping everyone out of the way so that we can actually do the work that is necessary.”

“That sounds a great deal like criminal rationalization.”

She lowered her arms. “You’ve never had to do it because no one tries to stop you from doing things because you are a man and an earl.”

He picked the teacup up again and lifted it in salute. “Fair play. I can’t argue that. Now, we should start.”

“We should have started an hour ago.”

“I did try to get your brother to turn around past Hampstead Heath, but he was having none of it.”

“Oh, dear,” she said with a hint of sympathy. “He took you out on one of his walks?”

His lips twitched. “I feared we’d end up in Scotland. I adore Scotland, but not when I’m supposed to meet someone, and that someone being you, who is still being extremely judgmental.”

“Forgive me,” she said at last. “I should have thought better of you.”

“Yes. You should.”

But, truthfully, she still had her suspicions. He was a rake. Surely, he was merely doing this because, well, he felt a certain obligation since they had been friends as children. She didn’t even know if he’d fully keep his word. “What are we going to do to begin?”

“There are two possibilities. We go immediately to the Duchess of Ashbridge’s establishment and get you your wardrobe.”

“Surely, a gown. I cannot comprehend the need for more,” she said.

“Well, you must, because if I take you out to the club or others like it, you

need to be dressed to perfection. You need to make men sigh and wish to die for a single night with you and for women to look at you and want to know who made your gown.”

“I see,” she said, her throat tightening as a wave of nerves rushed through her. “I hadn’t thought of that, which is terribly impractical of me.”

He stared at her quite seriously. “Yes. Considering how clever you are, one would’ve thought it was one of the first things in your consideration. You know the importance of how one looks.”

She did. All her life she’d been beautiful, and all her life she tried to ignore that. People had assumed she’d make a decent marriage, despite her father, because of her face. Most had assumed she’d use her looks for advantage to find a protector. Well, she had no desire for that. She’d seen the way that beauty could go. Far better to develop one’s personality and character.

She smoothed back her already smoothed back coiffure, as if affirming her belief. She licked her lips. “And the other option?”

He shrugged. “I can start to teach you how to behave,” he said. “As if you adore me, don’t you know? When we’re in company.”

The reality of it all hit her in that moment. She’d thought of this, to a degree. But, originally, she’d hoped to enter as a servant or sneak about the shadows. With him, she’d be on full display. And she’d have far better access to the information she hoped to acquire. She had avoided being noticed as a beautiful woman all her life, on purpose. She pressed her lips together as apprehension shimmied through her. “Am I really going to have to? I’m a writer, not an actress.”

“If you’re not an actress, you should give this up and just interview Cyprians and—”

“No, that’s not possible,” she said swiftly. “Sometimes, they don’t tell me the truth in an interview.”

“Nobody tells everyone the entire truth,” Derby said. That statement rattled through her.

“And you?” she asked softly, noting the hint of pain in his voice, the surprising depth of knowledge there. “Do you keep things to yourself?”

He cocked his head to the side. “Oh, Rose. Doesn’t everyone?”

Chapter Seven

Alexander took a final long swig of the tea, hoping the effects of it would soon take place. It was quite good stuff, brewed to perfection. Rose clearly knew her tea leaves and how to steep them.

He doubted she had a maid.

The apartment was in an acceptable part of London, but it was quite small, so she was good at economizing. Many people in this part of town had all their food brought in, and given the looks of the place, well, he assumed she did the same. She had a bed in the corner that was also a settee. Her desk was by the window, and there was a table and chairs.

Books lined every possible surface, and as he placed the teacup down, he spotted an errant sheet of paper with her handwriting scribbled across it. It was bold, just like she was, and he eyed the words for a moment and stopped. His breath caught his throat as his entire body responded to her words on a visceral level.

Sorrow whispers to throw myself into the black, into the abyss, and give way to the night. Ah, sorrow, the silver moon beckons. And though the dark pools of memory tempt me like the kelpies of the north, to lose myself... Hope, it sings. Hope, it calls, and I gaze to the moon instead...

“Did you write this?” he asked, picking it up.

She strode forward quickly and grabbed it from his hands. “Get your mitts off,” she said sharply.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, lifting his hands in defense. “It is remarkable.”

“It is not. It’s merely a few thoughts from my head, and it has nothing to do with you.” She whirled around and stuffed it in her reticule hanging from the hook on the wall.

“Have you done more like that?” he asked, unable to stop himself.

She stared at the wall, her shoulders tense. “Why?”

The power of the words, the pain of them, the determination not to give in, still rattled through him. “Because it’s quite good, Rose.”

“It is just a bit of nonsense,” she retorted. “I don’t think we should indulge ourselves in such things.”

“Indulge ourselves in poetry?” he asked, his brow furrowing.

She whipped around to face him. “Yes, far better to do what I’m doing right now, writing articles and pamphlets on the importance of improving society, helping people and doing better.”

“Yes, but Rose—”

“No,” she said firmly, and he took a step back. Her gaze turned to flint. “I gave up on flights of fancy, romance, and fairy tales years ago.”

“I apologize,” he said quickly, realizing he had struck a significant well of feeling. “I see that that is your personal writing and you do not wish to share it with anyone.”

But how he longed to read more. The words, they had struck him to his core, beautiful, powerful, full of pain and longing. He wanted to help her with them. To share them with the world. Would she let him? It was his life’s work, helping writers gain audiences, supporting them, strengthening them, but she looked as if she would rather light the poem afire than let him read more, and he wondered at that. Had he found the part of her she kept from the world? Quite possibly. He knew better than most that people lied. People lied to everyone, but most of all to themselves. He’d seen it all his life, certainly with his mother, his father, his grandmother, Rose’s father, his friend, and now he was certain Rose.

It did not matter how strong she was. It did not matter how capable. She was hiding part of herself from the world because she felt that she had to, or at least the poem suggested so. Pushing her would be a terrible idea. And suddenly the room felt too full of emotion. Too charged with her feelings of being caught, as if she had done something wrong.

He was stunned by it. From her face, she looked...ashamed of her poem. Something inside him railed at that look. “Let’s find the Duchess of Ashbridge. She will be discreet.”

She looked relieved. “No lesson in teaching me how to adore you?”

“It’s too early,” he said, “and I think it will be too hard.”

She laughed. “That difficult, do you think?”

“Well, the look upon your face right now tells me you would rather drag

me through the muck outside than look up at me with eyes that bespeak adoration and desire.”

“Desire?” she echoed, her gaze widening.

“Yes, if you’re going to look like my mistress, Rose, you’re going to have to appear as if you desire me.” He hesitated and asked softly, “Will it be so difficult?”

And then her eyes widened, and her gaze flicked over him as if she was assessing him, taking mark, tallying him up, and he held his breath, wondering, wondering exactly what judgment she was to come to. Could she desire him? That was the question going through her brain, he was certain of it, as she slowly traversed her gaze down his body, then back up to his face, and he felt himself alight with a sudden terrifying desire for her. It sparked and burned a fire through him, and he had to dig his fingertips into his palms to keep himself from letting out a rough breath.

“I think I’ll manage it,” she said simply.

A rueful laugh slipped past his lips. “I’m grateful it will not prove an impossible task.”

She tsked. “You’re good-looking, Derby, you know it, but looks are not important.” She draped her reticule over her wrist. “Let us depart.”

And in one comment, she had given him the cut direct. He might be handsome, but that would not make her truly desire him. He placed the teacup down and headed for the door. “My coach is waiting.”

She narrowed her gaze. “And have it get choked in these roads and make a journey that would take all of ten minutes take half an hour. Good Lord.” She let out a sigh. “Have a bit of adventure about you.”

“Rose, if you recall, I have already been on a three-hour walk today. You have been sitting here drinking tea.”

“Writing about challenging things. And are you worried another walk should undo you?”

For a brief moment, he wanted to show her exactly what he was capable of physically. But that was a dangerous road. Though his body had awakened to her, he couldn’t think like that. He gave her an elaborate bow. “Whatever you desire is perfectly acceptable to me.”

She blinked, then coughed. “Whatever I desire is acceptable to you.”

“Yes, Rose. Whatever you desire, I shall endeavor to make come true.”

Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly. “It won’t work.”

“I beg your pardon?”

She lifted her hand and waved it at him dismissively. “This charm.”

“I—”

“You are trying to disarm me to make me like you again. It won’t work. I haven’t forgotten.”

He hesitated, a deeply unpleasant feeling gripping him at her words. “Forgotten what?”

She laughed softly. “If I have to remind you, Derby, it doesn’t really matter.” She whirled on her heel and headed into the hall.

Forgotten. What had he possibly forgotten? He had only ever done good by her. He had only ever chosen what was best for her. He had only ever protected her. What could she possibly mean? He followed her through the hall to the streets below, the question thundering through his head, but it was clear that she had no intention of answering.

• • •

Three hours later

Rose stood in the Duchess of Ashbridge’s salon, in her impressive London townhouse, and wondered if one could die of boredom from standing still. The duchess was not boring, of course, but she was riveted in her work, for speed, and therefore focus, was necessary. Derby seemed just as focused.

The Duchess of Ashbridge had proved positively receptive to the plan and had immediately leaped into action, whipping out pins, measuring tapes, and pieces of paper. Blond curls dancing, and eyes alight with excitement, she had begun sketching furiously. Frankly, Rose liked the duchess very well, so she managed to keep any doubtful comments to herself. After all, the duchess had hired her to write a rather important pamphlet not long ago, and she found herself quite sympathetic to Her Grace. Still, Rose was not used to being a clotheshorse.

The duchess was draping a thin fabric over her, her brow furrowing as she considered. “Yes. This shall work to perfection. Don’t you think so, Derby?”

Derby cocked his head to the side, his dark, mischievous gaze assessing her. “She will look very well in it. Everyone will admire her.”

“I am here. I am still in the room. I have not vanished because you two are dressing me.”

The duchess laughed. “Forgive us, but this does happen sometimes when one is creating a new work. I am completely absorbed in the creation.”

Meeting her gaze, the duchess explained, "You shall feel magnificent in this gown. It will skim you easily. You shall have a remarkable amount of freedom of movement, and because it's allowed to be rather scandalous, well...you'll feel quite light."

Rose's stomach fluttered. "I shall not feel light if I feel scandalous."

The duchess tilted her head to the side and smiled. "Well, it is all for a good cause, so you won't actually be *doing* anything scandalous, will you?"

She sucked in a breath. "True."

"So you should enjoy it. Enjoy playing this new role. After all, you get to do something you've never done before. How many people can say that?"

"You are extremely optimistic," Rose said, wondering what Derby thought of her in such a gown.

The duchess laughed again. "This life is full of difficulties. To approach it with optimism is the wisest thing."

The duchess was no silly piece. She had faced revolution. She had watched France pulled apart by Napoleon, and she had escaped to London with her sister and worked as an absolute drudge in a dress shop for years until she had met the Duke of Ashbridge where her entire world had changed.

Still, Rose was not entirely certain she was prepared for all of this. She was looking at the sketches that the Duchess of Ashbridge had prepared, and she could not quite fathom that she would be wearing such a thing. "Where's the rest of it?" she asked.

"The rest of it?" the Duchess of Ashbridge inquired, wide eyed.

"About the neck?"

The duchess grinned. "Oh, well, there's nothing there. Perhaps Derby can supply you with jewels. I'm sure he has a large family collection."

Derby let out a groan. "Grandmama has the collection."

"What do you do with your mistresses? Surely you help them with jewels."

He met her gaze. "I buy them," he said. "Lords don't generally give family jewels to a mistress."

Rose winced. "You don't, but others do."

"Not if they're entailed."

"Possibly," Rose said. "But in my research, I've seen rakes get up to the worst sorts of things with their family's money and family things."

He nodded. "Yes, but not everyone is as lovely as me."

Rose laughed, a half groan. "Oh, Derby, you think you're so singular."

"I *am* singular. And everyone should think they are."

She narrowed her gaze at him. How did he do it? How did he feel so bloody good about himself when he went through the world without doing anything to improve it? It wasn't right. It wasn't fair. She had struggled her entire life to help people, and well, she didn't feel unique or special or as if the world was unfolding before her with love, and Derby acted as if everything was unfolding before him, as if life was a banquet, as if rose petals were strewn before his feet, and she realized the emotion traveling through her at this moment was not esteem but jealousy, and that was extremely perplexing. She swung her gaze to the duchess. "This is truly how courtesans dress?"

"Yes."

"Do you often dress courtesans?" she asked, desperately trying to remind herself of her goals and not be a coward about a frock. But she avoided being noticed, and it was becoming clear she was going to be noticed. A great deal of her was going to be noticed.

"I do, actually." The duchess paused and then explained as she continued to insert pins along the fabric. "They're some of my favorite clients. They're clever, don't you know? They have to be. They have to keep up with the gentlemen's knowledge and interests. Wives are not expected to be clever. Wives are expected to breed. Courtesans and mistresses, on the other hand, are expected to be interesting."

"What a dreary thought. Not that courtesans are supposed to be interesting but that wives have so little power and are expected to be so boring."

The duchess frowned. "Yes. It is the way of it. Men are quite odd creatures. They have set up the system thus, except for, of course, people like my husband and Derby here. James would hate it if I was boring, and he's not interested in having mistresses."

"Good," Derby said. "I'd have to kill him if he was."

She swung her gaze to Derby. "Why?"

A muscle tightened in his jaw. "Many married men do not have mistresses. Just so you know, Rose. Even though you seem to think it is the general state of affairs with rakes."

She swallowed at the intensity of Derby's gaze and the energy all but crackling from him. She turned to the duchess. "Was James a rake?"

"No, I don't think he was."

She swung her gaze back to Derby. "There you have it. He's not like you at all."

That muscle in his jaw only seemed to tighten further as a sort of icy note sharpened his gaze. “No, he’s not like me. He’s an American, and he’s quick to emotion, and he’s quite political. But here’s the thing: it doesn’t change what I said. Rakes are not necessarily interested in having mistresses after they’re married. Haven’t you read *The Rake Reformed?*”

She laughed. “Yes, I have,” she replied before returning, “Have you not read *The Rake’s Relapse?*”

The Duchess of Ashbridge’s gaze swung back and forth between them. “I’ve seen both plays,” the duchess said swiftly. “They each have a point.”

He narrowed his gaze. “A lot of rakes don’t relapse into womanizers.”

“Name one,” she said, and then he was silent for a long time.

“Exactly. Now when will I have my first gown so we can get this done?” She realized she was going to be spending several nights in Derby’s company, and the truth was when he had said that she was going to have to look as if she desired him, it had been a most difficult moment, because she wasn’t going to have to pretend. He was utterly beautiful from the top of his head to the tips of his polished boots.

With his strong muscles and his beautiful physique, he was a shockingly handsome man, and there was no denying that he was clever. Even if he was a rake and a wastrel. Yes, there was much to admire there, and it was going to be a damned nuisance but at least would simplify the need to look upon him as a mistress should.

The duchess smiled. “I have a gown that’s already made that you can use as soon as you’d like. Only a few adjustments need to be made, and I can have another dress ready for you in two days’ time. The others will take a bit more time.”

“The others,” Rose whispered. How had she not truly allowed herself to take in the full effects of what she had agreed to? She had to have known, deep in her core, but spending so much time with Derby? As his pretend mistress? Suddenly, her heart began to beat wildly.

“The Earl of Derby would not have a mistress who only has one nice gown,” the duchess said.

“How many gowns, then?” she whispered as she began to understand that the world he was involved in was different from the young women who worked the streets and the houses off Covent Garden. This was something else entirely, and while she’d read about them and interviewed some of the mistresses, she had not realized the true scope of the women who pleased the

men of power. After all, she'd been focused primarily on the fall of rakes and the effect on their families.

The duchess pursed her lips. "Dozens?"

Derby let out a plaintive noise. "First of all, I'm not in the active business of keeping mistresses, but she's correct. If you were my official mistress, I would set up an establishment for you. You would have your own house, your own coach. You would have servants."

"How much does all that cost?"

"A great deal. And I think you already know this, to some degree."

"The reality of it, to listen to you to talk about it. Could a man ruin himself keeping such a mistress? Surely, he spends a fortune. Such funds could fund my work for years."

He let out another plaintive noise. "You are not wrong, but, Rose, the amount of money that I have, the privilege that I have, there's no comparison. And you *know* that. That's why you write these articles, and that's why I can help you and no one else can."

Perhaps he could afford it, but many young men gambled, drank, and lived beyond their means keeping such women. She'd understood, but now that more doors were opening before her, the lavishness of it crashed upon her. She lived so simply and saw so much suffering. Did men like Derby even care about those who suffered whilst they threw away their golden coins?

She narrowed her gaze. "You are right. I'm being naive and silly. It is the way of the world, and I will not castigate you for being born into privilege. You can't help that."

It took effort to bite on the words, *But you could still do more than you do*. And it was why he was ever the disappointment to her. No matter the fact that she had adored him, adored him deeply as a girl. He could do so much more with his life, just like her papa. Her papa could have ruled the world as an artist, and Derby could be such a great man and change the world for the better. And yet he fell short. He played a gadabout, ignoring the misery of the world. "I'd like to have the ready-made gown immediately."

The duchess lifted a hand and paled. "I need to fit it to you, and it is at my shop. I can have it sent for, but it will still take us until tomorrow evening."

"Derby, where can you take me tomorrow night?"

He winced. "Rose—"

She gave him a hard stare.

He nodded. "Well, there is a place."

“Good, then let us go.”

“You might not be ready for it.”

She narrowed her gaze. “I think you can have me ready in time, don’t you?
At least for a brief outing.”

He gave a tight nod. “I suppose I can if you’re willing to do the work.”

“Oh,” she said quickly, “I am.”

Chapter Eight

Two beeswax candles cast a golden glow about the small apartment, and Alexander wondered at the simplicity of this life, one that could be so disciplined and good.

In general, he was surrounded by indulgence. In his chamber at home, he had dozens of candles and did not think of it. His dining room had cascades of candelabras. He spent probably as much on candles as some people did on food, if not more. And he swallowed at the thought of his excess, at the world's excess, in the face of so little for so many. Still, he did not think that, by shaming himself, he could help others. But the times that he had felt shame, the times that he still felt shame, shame over the cruelty of his father and his class, he had longed to creep into a dark corner.

And the greatest night of his shame had involved Rose. So many years ago... He swallowed back the bitter gall of that night that his father had forced him to witness. He turned his gaze to Rose. She would never have the kind of excess he had access to, for she lived her life with a determined purity that he found astounding. And he admired her, which of course was why he was here right now, why he wanted to help her more than anything, against potentially his better judgment. But Rose stood by her desk, folding papers into pamphlets, as if she could avoid him and the work that they needed to do for as long as possible.

He let his fingers trail over the spines of books along the shelves and paused on the works of Mary Wollstonecraft and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a sentiment that had first been expressed in France by the renowned female rights activist, Olympe de Gouges, a woman who had died for her belief systems. Wollstonecraft had died in childbirth, her visions of equality unrealized.

He dug his nails into his palms. He would not let that be Rose's fate. She

had to be supported. After all, he chose to support artists, painters, musicians, and the writers of novels, and he did not see why he could not do the same for Rose. There had to be a way she would allow it.

Of course, *this* way was the way. For now. “Are you ready?”

She lifted her gaze from her work. “Oh yes, of course.” She coughed. “Let us begin,” she said. She crossed to him quickly, placed her hands in front of her middle, and raised her chin, as if she was a governess about to begin a lesson.

“Now, I assume you’re going to tell me I should drape myself over you and tell you how darling you are.” She flashed him a cheeky grin. “Shall I give it a go?”

He gazed down at her. “Rose, though you have an excellent humor,” he began, “that is not at all what I was about to suggest, and I think that this is a moment in which you need to admit I’m superior in knowledge in this.”

She stared up at him, her eyes narrowing. “Yes, I will definitely admit that you are superior in sensuality and its indulgence.”

“A little indulgence is good for the soul, Rose,” he said. “Who taught you that pleasure was so terrible?”

“Life.”

“Well, then, let me show you that not all pleasure is bad or at least it can be used.”

“Oh, I have no doubts it can be used as a weapon or a tool,” she said, arching a delicate brow. “So let us begin since we must.”

“How excited you sound,” he drawled.

She laughed. “That’s sarcasm, Derby.”

“Indeed, it was, Rose. I’m glad to know you can recognize it.” He cocked his head to the side. “Now, come here.”

Her eyes narrowed anew, but she stepped forward.

“At some point, you can drape yourself on me,” he said, his gaze trailing over her face, that face he had admired for so long. “And, yes, you can tell me you adore me when we are in public. But, truthfully, that is not the sort of thing that mistresses are required to do.”

“No?” she said, her mouth quirking with disbelief.

“Mistresses are required to sparkle. They are prizes that will improve the appearance of an earl or a duke. You are a jewel in my crown, and you must show me off.”

“But,” she demanded, confused, “I must show *you* off?”

He nodded. “You have to show the entire room that I have the best mistress there, the most luxurious creature. You behave in a way that makes everyone want you, but the world knows that only I can have you.”

Her mouth dropped open into an O. “Are you talking about that mistress who arrived on a silver platter with no clothes on?”

“Exactly, Rose. You see, that’s what many mistresses do.”

“I can’t do that.”

“And I’m not asking you to. But I want to expand your ideas about what a mistress does and what she is for.”

Her shoulders squared as if she was preparing herself for an unpleasant battle. “I see.”

“Let us get comfortable together. Come. I think the best way—” He held out his hand to her.

“What?”

“Is to dance with me, Rose.”

“I don’t dance,” she stated as if it was the most obvious fact.

“Why ever not?” he asked, astonished. Did she deny herself all joys?

She licked her lips, tucking a nonexistent errant lock of hair behind her ear. “Because, because, because.”

“You must release some of the tension in your shoulders.”

“I’m not tense,” she countered before she paused. “I don’t know how to explain it, Derby, but I don’t do anything like that.”

He wanted to show her she could let go for a moment. “I’m going to put my arms about you.”

“You don’t need to do that,” she said, her eyes widening. “The only dance that requires that...”

“Is a waltz,” he rumbled, wanting to show her there could be so much beauty in the world he chose to live in. That there could be joy, and fun, and pleasure mixed with duty.

She scowled. “Look, I’m game to do all required, but surely, I can keep to a corner in the clubs and—”

“Rose, I’m doing you a favor, and it would be helpful if you showed a bit of enthusiasm for my tutelage. Or do you wish to fail before you begin?”

She drew herself up. “You are correct. Forgive me. I do want to do this, and I’m acting most remiss. Now, I will be an excellent pupil.”

“As you always are. New things can be daunting, and it seems pleasure is new to you.”

“Exactly,” she said. “Thank you.”

He had a funny feeling Rose always excelled at wherever she did. And from the look in her eye, she was about to throw herself at this. He slipped his hand to the back of her shoulder blade, took her other hand up.

“Now, we’re going to rock together slowly,” he said, gazing down into her eyes, wishing he could gaze into them without any sort of hesitation. “I wish you to simply give way to the movement.”

And as they moved together for a moment, he laughed as her hands firmly pulled at him, trying to tilt him about the room. “Rose,” he said softly. “You are leading me.”

“Am I?”

He nodded. “Though I know it is infuriating, the gentleman does lead.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course he does. The way of the world is also the way of the dance floor.”

“Yes, but the lady can lead in many other things.”

“You’ll have to teach me that, then.”

“Happily,” he said, his lips curling as he imagined her taking the lead in other acts of pleasure.

He began to move her about the room. “We are lucky,” he said. “We do not need to have the formality of Almack’s or the ballroom. For where we will be, we can be as close together as we like.”

“Or as necessary to show we are intimate.”

“Well said,” he replied, and he pulled her closer to him. He let his gaze soften as he stared down upon her face. It was not hard to do, at all. But the truth was he had wanted Rose for a long time. He still did. And with each growing moment, the reality of their deception tangled with the truth of how he felt.

Her own gaze began to soften. “How is it you are looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“As if I am the center of the universe.”

Was he so transparent? He could not let her think such a thing. “Oh,” he said easily, “practice. Anything one is good at requires practice.”

“I see,” she breathed and then tilted her own head back, gazed up at him, and mirrored his look.

And he nearly tripped. “How did you do that, Rose?”

“What?”

“Gaze at me as if *I*’m the center of the universe.”

“Practice,” she teased.

“What were you thinking of?” He wished to know what could cause her face to transform thus.

She blinked as if she was thinking of a quick reply. “I was thinking of a world with no pain in it.”

He winced. Some part of him had hoped that she was thinking of him, but of course, she was not. How foolish of him. He turned her slowly about the room until her body was beginning to relax and feel more languid in his grasp.

“Very good, Rose.”

She nodded. “I told you I’m a good student.”

“I shall never doubt you again.” He tilted her slightly to the left, brought her back, and spun her under his arm.

She let out a laugh as she went around quickly and suddenly collided with his chest, her hands splaying over his hard shoulders. “My goodness, you are far stronger than I imagined you were.”

“How so?” he queried, still taking in the feel of her palms on his chest.

Her gaze traced over his shoulders. “I can feel every line and sculpture of your muscles,” she said. “Most lords aren’t like that at all. They’re soft, but you are not. However do you find the time to make yourself thus?”

“I make time,” he said. “Because I want to be the best that I can be.”

“You do?” she said skeptically. “I thought you gave all your time to indulgence, in pleasure.”

“I have dreams and goals, as you do,” he said, trying to hide a note of bitterness at her clear disdain for him. “And if I spent all my time in a bottle of wine, like so many of the rakes do, I would not accomplish anything.”

“You have dreams?”

He laughed. “Rose, you make it sound as if I think of nothing but cakes and mistresses and wine.”

Her brow furrowed. “Don’t you?”

“I went to Oxford.”

She bit her lower lip. “Yes, but from what I understood, you did not spend a great deal of time studying.”

He groaned. “What did your brother tell you about me?” he asked softly, his hand roving over her back.

She did not remove her own hands, and their warmth seeped through his shirt, and he could scarce breathe at the slight touch. “He said,” she began,

her voice softer than it was before, “that you were not interested in studying and that you spent a great deal of time with the other lords, out and about.”

“I did spend a great deal of time with lads out and about, because that’s what lords do,” he said simply, the dim candle glow somehow making the exchange more intimate. “I was raised to do certain things, and I have done them, because that is what society and my family expected. But that doesn’t mean,” he gazed down at her face, his eyes slipping to her lips, “that I can’t want more, Rose.”

“Like what?” she whispered, her own lips parting ever so slightly.

“Would you like me to show you?”

“What?” she asked suddenly.

“Nothing,” he said, kicking himself for a fool. “Nothing. And I have an engagement, Rose. I must go.”

“But we were just beginning.”

“I have forgotten,” he said, pulling away though it was half agony. But he had to or he was going to do or say something he could not take back. He’d not been prepared for how she would make him feel. Feel...so... No, he couldn’t think it. “I shall come again tomorrow, and we will continue.”

“Where are you going?”

He cleared his throat, searching for a reasonable excuse. “I am to meet with Norton Wildcot.”

“The author?”

“Yes.”

She gazed at him with surprise, her hands still aloft for a moment before she lowered them to her sides. “How? Why? Have you even read any of his books?” she asked in astonishment. Her words hit like blows, for it was clear that she had assumed he did not have a serious thought to him.

The silence stretched for a long moment before he replied. “Rose, I pay for his entire living so that he might write those books you clearly admire. With ease.”

“You do?”

“Yes.” He ground his teeth, then added, “And I’m one of his first readers.”

She stepped back, her face transforming with shock. “Really.”

He shook his head, that old understanding that he wasn’t good enough for her coming to the fore. “Rose, I think you have created a person in your head that you believe is me. It is not,” he said. “And I can’t pretend to be someone that I’m not. So you must either let go of the person that you have imagined

or—”

“Or?”

“Accept me as I am,” he stated, but as she gazed back at him, he found himself confronted with the fact that she could only see a rake, which perhaps was his fault. He had been out of her life for years, so he added, gently, “Or is that impossible for someone like you?”

“Someone like me?”

“Yes.” How he longed for her to see that she saw him with a story she had largely created to protect herself. How he wished that she could see he had given her up, not through personal wishes, but through sacrifice. And he had not ceased in sacrificing his wishes to protect her and to honor her brother’s friendship.

“And who’s that?” she said, folding her arms just under her breasts. “What do you mean?”

“Someone who’s so judgmental.”

She let out a gasp. “I?”

“Yes, you,” he countered. “Can you deny that from the moment you threw yourself into my coach recently, you have made it clear you think little of me, and yet you want me to help you. That you think I am no better than...”

“Forgive me.”

“What?” A strange note danced through him at those words. Could she see him differently? Was it possible? Did he dare hope?

“Forgive me,” she repeated. “You’re correct.”

“I am?” he teased, desperate for her not to see how much her approval and admiration meant to him. “For once?”

“You’re trying to help me.”

He noted she wasn’t necessarily taking back her assumptions about his character. But it was something.

She gave him an odd look. “Look, I have to be strong and bold in my proclamations. If I’m not, people don’t take me seriously. And the truth is I don’t know any different about you, Derby. I only know what I read in the papers and what I’ve been told. And until I see that you’re different...”

He ground his teeth, cursing all the rags for noting his exploits. And he had exploits. He loved life and had lived it, but he’d hurt no one. Still, from where she stood, he was a cad.

“You can’t believe it,” he finished for her.

“Why should I?” she asked. “Too many people trust in what they want to

believe and not what is. And while I might want to believe you are a great man, I do not know it. For what I have seen is..."

"A rake." He sighed.

"Yes," she replied, with a slight shrug. "You are not a bad man, but you are not what..."

That shrug nearly undid him as if he was entirely unimportant to her aside from his ability to assist her with her writing. Had she forgotten all those years when they roamed the heath together as children? He hid his flinch. "I am not what you want me to be, either."

She looked away. "It is not a matter of what *I* want, Derby. It should be a matter of what you want."

He took a step back. "And you?" he queried. "What do you want for yourself?"

"I want to change the world."

He had no idea what possessed him, but he lifted his hand to her cheek and cupped it softly. "Then let me help you do it. But do not push me away or look at me with such disdain in your eyes." For a single moment, he was certain she would close her eyes and tilt her face into his palm.

She gazed up at him through her sooty lashes. "I should not be so unkind to the man who wants to help me."

"I think so," he said, feeling his heart open, feeling his desire for her begin to build.

"Cease," she said suddenly, grabbing his hand and guiding it away from her.

"What?" he inquired, shocked.

She shook her head, pained. "You are doing what rakes do."

He winced. "I beg your pardon?"

"You're being charming. You're seducing me."

"I'm not, Rose," he protested, his heart beginning to pound. Not with desire but with panic.

"You are," she said. "And it is tempting. You are so tempting. I can see the power you have."

"No, Rose, truly—"

"No, I want you to go now," she said forcefully. "Go see Wildcot. Come again tomorrow. We shall do better. We shall both be more prepared."

"If that is what you wish," he said, his spirits sinking.

"It is." He headed out into the night, feeling like the worst sort of cad,

because he had not been trying to seduce her. He had been his genuine self.
And she had sent him away.

Chapter Nine

“I cannot understand why anyone would wish to throw their lives away for a few moments of pleasure.”

The Duchess of Ashbridge cocked her head to the side and smiled, her blue eyes dancing. “I confess I did not either until I met James.”

Rose snorted, standing as still as a statue given the pins in Lily’s hands. “You can’t possibly convince me that a few moments in your duke’s arms would cause you to throw your entire life away.”

“My entire life?” Lily asked, pursing her lips as she considered. “No, of course not, but I confess that it is a tempting thing indeed to be in James’s arms. And while I will not go into the details of it, I can assure you, Rose, that it is bliss.”

“But such bliss is the creation of turmoil,” Rose exclaimed. “Surely, it should be eschewed at all costs.”

“You’re referring to two different things,” the duchess said as she arranged the gown over Rose’s shoulders. She stepped back, eyed the work, and nodded. “I think this will do nicely.”

Rose peered at herself in the long, gold-edged mirror in the room. Her stomach tightened, and she felt her knees waver. “I cannot possibly wear this.”

“Why not?” the duchess asked, beaming.

She gazed at the curves of her body barely hidden by the fabric. She was no delicate, wilting flower. She’d been in factories, gaming hells, and dangerous alleys. But she had never played a part before and certainly not one like this.

She gestured up and down herself. “It is translucent.”

“Isn’t it perfect?” Lily inquired brightly. “It was designed for a courtesan, a good one, but she has gone to the continent.”

“Why?” Rose asked.

Lily hesitated. “She is with child and will be delivering her baby there.”

The cost of rakes. There it was. A reminder it wasn’t all joy as Derby seemed intent on making her consider. She could not forget. She could not forget burying her mother in a pauper’s grave. Yes, she had to remember each painful moment lest she find herself tempted to believe the illusion that Derby tried to spin about his world.

“You see,” Rose said, “pleasure results in such things.”

“You are making a mistake if you think courtesans work for pleasure, my dear.” Lily tsked. “Courtesans do not have to take pleasure in what they do, though the best ones absolutely enjoy it.”

She did know this. She’d interviewed enough women on the game. She had focused almost entirely on the lives of rakes and the effects on their families. But now, she was playing a mistress, or that rarer breed, a courtesan, and she felt a bit at a loss.

“How do you know this?” Rose asked, curious how a lady like Lily had learned so much.

Lily drew in a long breath. “Well, the last years of my life were spent on the cusp of London’s shadiest parts. And when I was in Paris, I saw they have an entirely different attitude to pleasure than here. I was a young girl when I left, but I still remember what it was like. They do not have the same feelings about sin or bodies as the English do. Even the upper middle class there, well, they indulged in a great deal of pleasure.”

A breath huffed out of her. “There is that word again. Pleasure. What I see is that pleasure leads to indulgence. Once you indulge in anything, it makes you sick.”

“Only if it is too often, Rose,” Lily said softly. “Or without care.”

Rose’s throat tightened as she recalled how weak the world was through her father’s actions and choices. “You can say this because you have the security of being a duchess.”

“Perhaps you are correct, but I will tell you that what can occur between a man and woman is wonderful.” Lily hesitated, then added gently, “And you seem to be judging people without truly understanding, which isn’t like the Rose I know. This seems personal to you.”

“Oh, heavens,” Rose groaned.

“What?” Lily queried, adjusting the skirt of the gown.

She blew out a breath. “Another word I keep hearing.”

Lily tucked in a bit of silk along her bodice and pinned it. "Which word?"

She winced. "Judge. I am not judgmental. I simply wish to keep people..."

"Yes, you wish to keep them safe," Lily surmised easily, stepping behind her. "But you don't understand them, Rose. You can't because you haven't experienced this part of life, what people are willing to throw their lives away over. You are innocent of it. And that isn't a bad thing, but it does mean you're trying to make sense of actions through hypothetical ideas."

She pressed her lips together, feeling at a loss for the first time in years. She wouldn't allow such comments from many, but she admired the duchess. Lily had taken hold of her life commissioning her to write a pamphlet to expose a notorious bawd who ruined the lives of poor young women who had no choice in this cruel world. "So you think I'm coming at this from the wrong angle."

"Yes," Lily said. "You know how to fight and think and argue. But in this you cannot be a simple observer, making judgments. And, I must add, Derby is not a bad fellow."

"I know he's not." Did she truly appear to think so little of him? Once she had adored him, had wanted to follow him to the ends of the earth, but she had woken to the cruel realities of life, and she would follow no one now. "I have known him since I was a child," she said.

"And was he a terrible fellow then, misusing people all over the place?"

"Not at all," she said quickly. "He was always kind to me. But he's a rake."

"Can't rakes also do good? Can we be not more than one thing?" Lily queried.

"Of course we can," she said. "But..."

"But what, Rose?" Lily's eyes widened, and she stepped back. "Ah, I think I know why."

Rose narrowed her eyes. "What?"

Lily's lips parted in a rueful smile. "It is because you like him."

"I do like him. I shan't negate that." She lowered her head as sorrow tried to fill her heart, as the ache of the happiness she'd once known rose to taunt her. She squeezed her eyes tight, willing that pain away. "But everybody can like a merry fellow and see that that merry fellow will lead them into trouble."

"You think he'll lead you into trouble?" Lily asked doubtfully, and then she asked more assertively, "Does he have that sort of power over you?"

Rose opened her eyes and replied swiftly. "Of course not."

“Then you should fear nothing. He will not hurt you. Derby’s not that sort of person.”

But the truth was Rose was not so certain. She had once wanted to open her heart to him, to be his dearest friend, to tell him everything, to be... She dug her nails into her palms. He had taken it all away. She couldn’t go through that again. She couldn’t lose him again. Nor open her heart. She’d seen where that led. All she cared about now was saving others, even just one, from the suffering her family had known.

No, she would have to be on her guard surely, but perhaps he was the best person to help her understand this world of pleasure, to understand why people would do such mad things.

Chapter Ten

“Drat,” Rose exclaimed from the other side of the simple dressing screen.

Alexander folded his arms across his evening kit and fought the consternation in his chest. She was getting dressed on the other side of the screen.

When he had arrived, she was still hard at work at a pamphlet, and she had been in a dressing gown. A dressing gown. He wanted to fall underneath the floorboards and be consumed with the thoughts he had had, for he had imagined her body beneath that dressing gown, the fabric of it caressing her beautiful frame. Now, she was behind the screen, likely half-dressed and cursing.

“What is it, Rose?” he managed to say, though he feared it sounded a half groan.

“I cannot get it on myself,” she exclaimed. “It never even occurred to me I wouldn’t dress myself.” There was a beleaguered sigh before she continued. “But most ladies have a ladies’ maid, even courtesans.”

The consequences of her words hit him. “You have never needed someone to assist you in dressing?”

She did not deign to reply.

“Of course not,” he said, plowing his hand through his hair. Not because he was shocked by her lack of servants, but because he knew where this was likely heading. “Your gowns are so...”

“What?” she prompted archly.

“Simple,” he said. “Serviceable, but simple.”

There was the rustle of fabric from behind the screen. “Most people of my class have to dress themselves or they live with someone who will help them. I live alone.”

“So you do,” he said, waiting for her to finally ask for help. Hoping she

would at last realize what needed to be done. “Are you never afraid?”

“Why should I be afraid?”

“I have never truly lived alone,” he offered truthfully, leaning against the small fireplace mantel.

She gasped. “How astonishing.”

He winced. “I’ve always had servants about, Rose.”

“It must be very nice.”

“It is,” he said, though he wasn’t certain she was truly being complimentary. “But I am always watched.”

“Oh.” She was silent for a moment, then proclaimed, “I would hate that. We always forget that with privilege comes a price. There are downsides to everything. Like this gown,” she blurted. “Which I don’t even like.”

“You don’t like it?” He was now even more eager to see what Lily had found for Rose.

“I’m all but naked in it.”

He swallowed, not truly certain if he was prepared to see Rose thus. He’d have to pull himself together and take a considerably long, cold ice bath.

“The duchess informed me this is a common gown in your set,” she scoffed. “I do not see how all the women haven’t died of colds.”

His lips twitched at her tart assessment. “Let’s see.”

“I can’t show it to you,” she said. “I can’t get it laced.”

Here it was, the moment he’d been anticipating. He tried to hold himself back but found himself offering. “Would you like me to assist you?”

She let out an impatient noise, clearly unaccustomed to needing help from anyone for anything. “You’re going to have to.” She trudged out from behind the screen, her face like thunder, and presented him her back. “Do it up, if you please.”

He was faced with her naked, beautiful back. His breath caught in his throat. The sheer perfection of her smooth, pale skin nearly undid him. The curve of her neck, the slope of her shoulder, and the way her waist arced down to her hips. Of course, she had the thinnest of chemises under the even thinner silk, but this did nothing to hide her curves.

“Is something amiss?” she asked, glancing back over her shoulder.

Amisss? Despite the cold shower, his wits had gone wandering and his body was desperately trying to seize control. He was no callow youth. Surely, this should be nothing to him. A back? But her back. Damnation, he wanted to kiss every inch of her spine, kneel and worship—

“Derby?” she prompted. “Are you unwell?”

He cleared his throat. “Pardon me, I merely wish to make certain you won’t mind me,” he said.

“I wouldn’t be standing here, before you, if I minded.” She whirled around to face him, her eyes alight with intent. “We are both being too delicate about all this. I must complete my research. And we both know each other. There is no need for either of us to be easily intimidated. We are both adults and understand what we are about. This is all for a good cause. Now, get on with it.”

A good cause. Was that what the desire humming through his blood was?

“As you wish,” he said, and slowly he reached out and touched the edges of the silk bodice. For a moment, his fingertips brushed her back, and she stilled beneath his touch. They were both quiet. The only sounds in the room were from the crackling fire and the street below as coaches rattled by and people sold goods of all sorts. His fingers skimmed her skin as he carefully took up the ribbons, then laced them through the holes meant to bring the gown together at the back. “You’re not wearing a corset or stays,” he said, his voice rougher than he had intended.

Her ribs expanded against the gown as she drew in a breath. “She told me the gown was not meant for that and I have the figure to avoid such things. I feel...”

“What?” he whispered as he secured her bodice.

She turned as his fingertips skimmed her gown as she twisted to face him. She lifted her gaze to his. “I feel nude, and as if I have no armor on.” Her pale hands smoothed down the skirts of her gown. “What do you think?”

Doubt danced across her face. She truly did not know what to make of how she was dressed. He took a step back, and here in the dim lights, he could see the shadows of her body, her waist, the curve of her hips, the place where her legs met the V of her thighs, and he swallowed.

But that? That was not the power or source of her beauty. No, that was in her eyes where he could see her soul, which had been tested and been in battle but had never been defeated. Though it was wounded now. “You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen,” he said softly.

Her brow furrowed. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not being ridiculous.”

“Beauty...beauty is not always helpful. My mother was beautiful, and it only brought her pain.”

His heart ached for her, then. The pain that had been planted so long ago had taken root and grown. Grown so strongly she did not even wish to be seen as beautiful. Beautiful things caused pain. How could he show her that did not have to be true?

She gave him a swift smile, though it did not reach her eyes. “Your face says everything.”

“What does my face say?” he queried gently, hating the pain shadowing her gaze.

“I do not look anything like myself and so no one will recognize me.”

“No, Rose,” he assured, though he wondered if somewhere deep inside her, this Rose had always longed to emerge but never could because beauty was dangerous in her eyes. “You don’t.”

And she didn’t. She looked like a glorious goddess divine, like a Grecian statue come to life. She was perfection. Every man would stare at her this night. For Rose had always been beautiful, but she tried to hide that beauty. Now he truly understood why.

Not only did beauty cause pain, it led to the interest of men. Because she gleamed like a jewel and all would look at her, longing to possess her. But no one could possess Rose. Of that, he was certain. She possessed herself. Anyone who tried to own her would fail, for she was elusive, never willing to let her guard down. And for one moment, he longed, longed more than anything, to have her. But he knew she would never allow it.

Chapter Eleven

“Stop gawking.”

“I’m not gawking,” Rose retorted, even as she had to close her mouth, lest it hang open like a codfish.

“You are,” he said, his sensual mouth curving.

“Well, who is that?” she asked, sotto voce.

“*That* is Evelyn Turnbridge, the jewel of the demimonde.”

“Good heavens,” she whispered and decided to admit her awe. “Well, I *am* gawking. Look at her.”

He arched a brow. “You admit even you can be stunned?”

“I can be stunned.” And how could she not be? Evelyn Turnbridge was being carried into the room atop a long divan by footmen who looked delighted to be appointed the task. Her ivory gown skimmed her body and was essentially translucent. Jewels winked in her blond hair. She looked languid as if she had not a care of the world and the attention of the entire room should naturally fall upon her. And when the men carrying her in stopped and lowered her to the ground, she stood on delicate feet, raised up her arms, and said, in a luxurious voice, “I am the clouds of Cyprus. Can I be touched? You must please me to find out!”

She descended into the crowd, which applauded happily, as if lucky to catch a mere glimpse of her. This was something Rose was unprepared for, even if she had read about it. She had not anticipated how a woman could hold a room full of powerful men in the palm of her hand.

For a moment, she found herself in utter awe of Evelyn, and she admired the woman’s ability to do what so many others could not. The fact was, with her background both as someone outside of the ton and a young woman who had no intention of selling her body, she’d never had access to such places.

She was used to the sort of arrangements that occurred at the houses around

Covent Garden. She had gained admittance into a few of those houses where the bawds were business minded and enjoyed strong gin and a good laugh. Yes, some of them were Cyprians, but this was entirely different, a class she had never been admitted to.

She grated her teeth. The luxury was shocking. There was no other way to describe it. The room was decadent, gilded in gold, paintings by masters hung upon every surface. The furnishings were silk. Servants carried trays laden with champagne and punch. The clothes and jewels would have fed all of the East End for years. And Evelyn Turnbridge was the symbol of it all with her beautifully coiled hair, slightly rouged lips, and gown that looked as if it had been spun of the clouds, shot through with silver thread. The truth was even she was nearly seduced by Evelyn Turnbridge. Perhaps this world wasn't all bad if a woman could attain such power in it. But the cost? The cost seemed high.

Evelyn disappeared into the crowd of her admirers.

"She is one of the greatest courtesans of the age," he said.

"She's a Cyprian, like Cyprus?" The term had always amazed her, but due to her study of Greek and mythology, she understood the legends around it and why it was considered a place of temptation and decadence. Which was why courtesans had claimed that name.

"I'm glad you understand the term." He winked. "I would be surprised if you hadn't done your research."

She refrained from rolling her eyes, something she doubted a mistress would do toward her keeper. "Of course I've done my research." She paused, trying not to fidget in her drafty gown. "The only thing is the reality of it all is different than reading about it. This is nothing like the gaming hells of the East End."

"Were you expecting it all to be depravity everywhere?"

"Yes," she said. "Where is it?"

He laughed at that. "Oh, I'm certain there is some depravity going on upstairs, but you must understand that gentlemen do not come to establishments like this to do that."

"Why?" she blurted. "I thought this was..."

"You thought this was a place of prostitution and scandal. But Rose," he began, "it's not just that. This is a place where people come to discuss politics, ideas, music, art."

"And the other thing, too, surely?"

“Yes.” He laughed, a deep, rolling sound. “And the other thing when the moment is right and a Cyprian wishes to keep her keeper pleased.”

She turned her gaze about the room. Music was being played in the corner by an exquisite string quartet. People were engaged in animated conversation. Beautiful women in beautiful frocks, with their hair curled perfectly, spilling over their shoulders, piled upon their heads, seemed to float about with confidence.

Great vases of flowers were upon almost every table. The gentlemen were drinking wine or brandy and appeared to be in ecstasies over the conversations. Gambling was taking place in the room adjacent. She heard the roll of dice, and someone exclaimed, “Huzzah! Now hand me my chips,” and the entire crowd around the table let out a roar of excitement.

She crossed toward the arched way to get a better view.

“Ah,” Derby whispered, leaning down so that his lips nearly touched her ear. “That is Madame Louise. She is an excellent gambler. You should never go against her. She will take every coin you have.”

She narrowed her eyes, her stomach tightening at the significance of such a seemingly jesting statement. “Is that a customary thing? Courtesans taking the money off the men in the room?”

Derby’s brows rose. “It is the point. The courtesans take everything they can so that they can retire to a ripe old age and have something. If they don’t, they end up—”

“They end up in the back streets, taking any corner for their bread...and gin?”

“Yes,” he said without any attempt to make light of it. “And those are perhaps some of the women you’ve interviewed.”

She nodded. She had sat with them, taking notes as the women had sipped gin in taverns, their eyes lighting as they thought back on their days of glory. A striking contrast to the hell they found later.

“Here, they will get every bit of coin they can.” He inclined his head to the gentlemen in the room. “From the rakes present.”

“The women will take every coin they can, whether they can afford it or not,” she clarified, though she was certain of the answer.

“Stop lecturing here,” he warned softly. “Someone’s going to hear you. You sound like someone who’s come to convert them all to kneeling and praying but care not if they starve.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“What is it that you mean, then?”

She bit the inside of her cheeks, her body hot with the injustice of it all. “I understand the plight of the ladies because they must make their coins somehow. Most of them are impoverished or have no one to support them.”

“Well said,” he replied. “And yet it feels as if you are about to launch an argument.”

She shook her head, even as bitterness crept through her. “But the gentlemen, the absolute foolishness of it.”

He rolled his eyes. “It is their decision.”

“No,” she said, her eyes stinging as her father’s broken frame came to her. How he could not even meet his family’s eyes. “That is not it. Have you had seen—”

“What?” he asked softly.

“Nothing,” she said, her throat tight.

“Truly,” he urged. “I wish to know.”

“My father’s desperation as he tried to maintain...” She swallowed as her hands began to shake. “Maintain the appearance of a gentleman, to be seen as important. To be seen as valuable in society. He spent far more than he had to make others think well of him.”

“That is a tragedy. But that is not limited to rakes.”

She looked away. They had not come here to discuss her father. They had come here for her to see the life and destruction of a rake firsthand. “Take me about the room.”

He took her hand in his and with great show turned it over and slowly, for the whole room to witness, lowered his mouth to her palm. “Anything you require, I am happy to provide.”

Despite herself, the touch of his lips against her skin caused a trace of fire to dance through her blood and over her skin, eliciting the strangest response in her belly. The room seemed to stand still, and she could not breathe. She thought of Mesmer and the way he had mesmerized his audiences. For in this moment, she felt completely in his hold.

He locked gazes with her, then lowered her hand and placed it atop his other one. The gentle feel of their naked skin against each other shocked her, for she was not in the habit of touching gentlemen’s hands. But she had a dark suspicion that only Derby could make her feel so intensely.

Here, gloves were not required. Many ladies were scandalously very near naked. And as they headed about the room, weaving their way through ladies

tossing their heads back, laughing prettily at anything the gentlemen before them had to say, she narrowed her gaze. Was this what this was?

A temple of massaging gentlemen's opinions about themselves? She rather thought it was, but just as they were about to turn a corner, she spotted a gentleman who looked incredibly melancholic. He sat in the corner alone. Her heart dropped. "There," she said softly. "This is what this is really about."

He cocked his head to the side. "What?"

"That man over there," she whispered. "He looks incredibly sad."

"It is possible you've spotted someone who is in difficult circumstances."

"I should talk to him."

"No, you should not. You may observe. We can go close, and I shall speak to him first."

"If you insist."

They crossed through the crowded room over to the young man who was sitting at a table by himself, a glass of brandy in hand.

"Puppy," Derby drawled. "You look as if someone has kicked your dog."

"Worse," the young man lamented. "Someone has stolen my mistress, and I've called the bastard out over it."

"Bloody hell," Derby said sympathetically. "Can nothing be done?"

"I don't know," the young man said, looking as if he was facing the gallows. "And I have to go out and face him at dawn."

"Would you like me to intervene?" Derby asked.

The young man stared with a broken, shocked gaze, his cravat wrinkled. He lifted his nearly empty brandy and drank it to the dregs. "It is too late. My seconds have arranged it."

She swung a gaze to him as if to say, "There, you see?"

But she could not let this stand. Just one. She had to save just one, for he was so young. His life ahead of him and he did not seem a bad sort. Surely, he was merely caught up in a way of living meant to wreck the soul and life of many who took part in it. "Something can be done," she protested. "I'll speak to the lady. Or I'll talk to the other gentleman. You can still cry off."

The young man swung his gaze up to Rose, and he gave her a wry smile before turning to Derby. "I can see why you are in such good humor. The lady with you is a jewel. No doubt she will be one of the treasures of society soon."

Derby gave a sad smile, as if he sensed how badly it could go for the young

man come dawn. “She is exquisite.”

“Perhaps,” she suddenly blurted as an idea popped into her head, “a dance with me could fix it all.”

Derby narrowed his eyes as if he wanted to demand what the bloody hell she was doing.

The young man looked to her. “I don’t see how.”

She cleared her throat and launched into her plan. “Well, if you simply showed your mistress that you have already forgotten her, you might feel as if there is no reason to atone for the man stealing her away and all society would see that you care not.”

“Yes,” the young man said, brightening with sudden hope. “What an excellent idea. And I could send my second to apologize, citing that I had no right to claim ownership to a mistress who was clearly pleased to have other company.”

And with that, the young man extended his be-ringed hand. Without hesitation, she took it, desperate to change the course of his life. Desperate to change the course of anyone’s life who might lose it on the brutal path of the rake. He took her out to the edge of the polished wood floor.

Derby stalked after them and said, “Sorry, old boy. It’s a good idea, but this one is taken. You can’t have her.”

“Oh, but just for a dance,” Rose protested, smiling tightly, all but begging him with her gaze to allow it.

Derby stilled, though he looked at war with himself. “As you will. I will not interfere with the wishes of my treasure.” And with a grateful glance to Derby, she and the young man began to dance about the room. The crowd was staring, for the Earl of Derby’s new mistress was in the arms of another man, a man who had just called another man out.

The gentlemen were taking note. And she wasn’t entirely certain if she’d done the right thing because she hadn’t meant to draw notice. But suddenly she was noticed, and she did not care. For all she wanted to do was stop the young man from feeling so terribly sad and to perhaps stop a duel. That was far more important than anything else. If she could protect his family, his mother or father, or siblings from the grief of his death...

She tilted her head to the side and gave him as winning a smile as she could. “There now, can you not call it off? Everyone is looking at us. And whispering!”

“Perhaps I can,” he said, the melancholy sluicing away from him, replaced

by relief. “Perhaps it’s not necessary for me to drown in the loss of another young lady when one such as you is so clearly interested in me.”

She wagged her brows at him, ready to turn the conversation quickly. “Truly, I’m interested in you telling me about what it’s like to have a courtesan.”

“Expensive,” he groaned, and with every beat of the dance, he appeared lighter, more hopeful, as if he could see a way out from the darkness he’d found himself in.

“Yes, so I hear,” she ventured. “Will you let yourself be ruined by it?”

He snorted. “Well, I nearly fought a duel.”

“Exactly,” she said. “Hardly worth it!”

“Are you negating your own profession?” he asked, laughing.

“Perhaps,” she said swiftly before adding gently, “it would be wiser if after our dance you went home.”

“No,” he said. “Gentlemen like me don’t go home. We have the next adventure.”

The music ended, and she felt all her hope that she might have saved him slip through her fingers. Why did rakes get so caught in the net? Why could they not escape and be free?

Derby swept in and quickly escorted her away from the young man. “That was a bold move, but maybe an unwarranted one.”

“And maybe we have averted a duel,” she whispered, uncertain what to do with the melancholy now whispering through her. It was as if she had swallowed the young man’s pain when he had refused to see the path he was on would only grow worse.

“Should we go?” he asked softly. “You seem—”

She squared her shoulders. “Of course not. Within moments of arriving, I’ve discovered a duel and I’ve seen Madame Louise, who will drain a man dry of coin at the gambling tables. You see?” She forced her voice to sound bright. “It’s all beginning to fall together.”

“Yes, but not a great deal of depravity yet,” he teased.

“This is depraved enough,” she said softly. “Here you see only the beauty, not the people at home. Not the ones who must witness the suffering that comes after. We can’t leave yet.”

He stared at her for a long moment, some unknown emotion dancing in his gaze. But then, a muscle tightened in his jaw, resignation hardening his eyes. “Come along.” Derby led her toward the gambling rooms, but just before

they turned the corner, festooned with silk drapes, she spotted someone she knew.

Lord Berwood strode toward them, a glass of claret in his hand, his sharp gaze studying the bosom of the bouncing young lady on his arm. But then he looked up, and for an instant Rose's heart stopped, certain he'd recognized her. She darted her gaze about, searching for any escape.

Rose spotted a couple in the corner entwined in each other's arms, a kiss imminent. Shoving all hesitation aside, Rose whipped toward Derby, determined that there was only one solution. She threw her arms about him, and before she could think again, she brought his head down to hers and then pushed him behind the curtain into the small nook no doubt meant for such things and attempted to kiss him thoroughly.

Chapter Twelve

Alexander had not realized that he had wanted to kiss her just about his entire life as a young man, but now he knew it to his very core. Holding Rose in his arms was heaven.

He wound his arms around her back, pulling her close, unable to let her go. He let his mouth take hers in a fiery kiss. He did not hold back because he did not know when this could ever happen again, so he wanted to savor the moment entirely. His mouth teased over hers. Her lips parted with a gasp of astonishment, and her hands came up to his shoulders.

For one moment, he was certain she was going to push him away and tell him to get off. She did not. Instead, she softened at his touch. Her hands slipped up around his shoulders to his neck. Her lips parted ever so slightly, and he could not stop himself. He teased his tongue against hers.

She gasped again. Her mouth opened wider, and the kiss grew wild as they held on tight to each other, as if they could be ripped apart at any moment. But there, in the house in St. John's Wood, hidden by the curtain, they were in a world of their own. Nothing could stop them, not if they didn't wish it to.

He felt the soft curves of her body pressed against his, and he wanted to give in to every moment of it. Was this a dream? It felt like a dream. Surely, it had to be, because Rose would never, ever let him kiss her like this, nor should she. With each kiss, with each touch of their body, he knew he was casting himself further into hell and breaking his vows anew over and over again. But he could not stop.

And so, when at last he had to lift his head from hers, for he could not take her there behind a curtain, no matter the fact that a rake and a courtesan might do such a thing for fun, he gazed down into her eyes. "Why did you—"

She licked her lower lip. She looked dazed, with her cheeks pink and mouth red from kissing. "I saw someone."

He simply blinked, his brain not quite as nimble as he wished. “You saw someone?”

She nodded, wisps of curls dancing about her face. “I did not wish him to recognize me.”

“Oh,” he said, his spirit sinking. The kiss had seemed completely out of character and a surprise, so of course there had been a reason for it.

But the fact that it had been because she had wanted to hide her identity, somehow it kicked him in the heart. Somehow, he’d had some ridiculous hope she’d kissed him because in that moment she’d been free and wanted *him*, wanted to know the taste of his lips, but he was a fool. “Well,” he growled softly. “I’m glad we were able to elude the person.”

“Yes,” she said, straightening her gown. “I am, too. Now, shall we get to it? There’s much work to be done.”

Without another word, she whirled away from him as if nothing had happened. She marched out into the crowd, and for one moment, he stood dumbstruck. How could she do that? How could she go away from him as if nothing had happened? Well, the answer was clear, of course. She felt nothing for him. The kiss had meant nothing.

Now, he forced himself to shove aside those feelings of regret and rushed after her because as bold as she was, as strong as she was, as intelligent as she was, she truly had no idea of the waters she was swimming in just yet. Her actions with the young man had proved that, so he was going to have to guide her carefully.

• • •

Rose rushed away from the kiss as one might out of a house on fire and charged right into the soft, perfumed body of Evelyn Turnbridge. The courtesan stood with ease, clearly unfazed by anything. She let out a laugh, holding her champagne glass carefully aloft. “My dear, have you had one too many or are you rushing away from a wicked roue?” Her bright eyes widened. “Tell me what it is. I shall save you if necessary.”

Evelyn sounded dramatic, but there was a serious note in her voice, and Rose realized that Evelyn meant it. If a wicked man was following her, Evelyn would help her.

She was astonished. She had not thought that such a powerful woman might step in if another Cyprian was in trouble. “I am not being chased by a wicked man, but I am quite glad I have run into you.”

Evelyn cocked her head to the side, causing her diamond earbobs to dance against her neck. “Why is that? Though you are clearly new on the scene, for I have never seen you before.”

“And that is it,” she replied quickly. “I’ve never seen you before, and I find you most fascinating.”

Evelyn tsked. “Oh dear. Is that what it is? Well, I’m glad you think so.” She began to turn away.

“No, wait,” she rushed. “I admire what you’ve *done*.”

Evelyn paused and narrowed her blackened lashes ever so slightly. “And what is it that I’ve done?”

Rose gazed to the crush in the rooms. “You’ve captured them all.”

Evelyn paused. “I beg your pardon?”

“You’ve made them see what you want them to, haven’t you? Not what is real. You make them believe a lie.”

“Oh,” Evelyn said, curious now. “You’re not like the rest, then.”

“I am not like the rest,” she agreed swiftly, a trifle uncomfortable at her own deceptions.

“And you?” Evelyn prompted, holding her barely touched champagne playfully. “Are you making everyone see what you want them to see?”

“I am trying,” Rose said.

“You’re not doing a very good job yet,” Evelyn said with a smile. “You don’t belong here.”

Rose fought a note of shock. “How do you know?” she whispered instead.

Evelyn let out a lovely laugh. “My dear, I have been on the scene since I was sixteen. You have been on the scene for two seconds. You are as innocent as a sheep in Shropshire.”

Rose groaned. “Is it that obvious?”

“Indeed.” Evelyn assessed her, up and down. “Who is your keeper, then? Or are you here without one, looking for one? Because if you are, you’re going to be devoured or worse. A pimp will get you.”

“You’re warning me of quite a few dangers most generously,” Rose said. “And why is that? Do you wish to be my—”

Evelyn hid a cringe before her dazzling smile resumed. “I have no wish to be a bawd. We must protect each other. I have been independent since I was sixteen, and I’ve been most sought after since then. I’ve arranged all my own contracts over the years.”

Rose drew in a long breath. “You make it sound as if it has been a great

many years.”

“Oh.” Evelyn pursed her painted lips. “Well, I am twenty-two. In my line of work, I’m ancient, don’t you know? But don’t let anyone else in on the secret, you see, because the gentlemen all think that I’m no more than nineteen.”

“Good Lord,” she replied. “Is it so important to be so young?”

“Most of them like new things or unattainable things,” she said with a shrug. “And now I’m considered almost unattainable.”

“Hence the cloud bit,” Rose said.

Evelyn inclined her head in acknowledgment. “One must always continue to reinvent oneself, and then one will always be desired.”

“Thank you for that advice,” Rose said, considering how exhausting it must be to always stay so very interesting and in fashion, and the fear of being tossed aside.

Evelyn gestured with her champagne glass. “Is he yours?”

“Who?” she said, glancing back over her shoulders. “Oh, Derby. Yes, he’s mine.”

Her eyes widened as she laughed, that delightful bell laugh. “My goodness, you’ve made that sound so boring one might assume you were his wife.”

“I did not,” she gasped, rather surprised by the assessment.

Evelyn tsked. “You did. You said it like a wife says it, not a mistress or a courtesan. You must be more careful or you won’t keep him long.”

Rose hesitated, then dared, “How should I have said it, then?”

Evelyn shook her head in dismay. “My dear, you really are green. But, you see, your fellow? He’s different.” Evelyn traced her fingertips along the rim of her glass, causing it to hum ever so slightly. “He’s not like many of the others.”

Rose frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“I’ve seen him about for years, and he cares about things. And people.” Evelyn’s lips parted in a smile, one that transformed her face before it vanished again behind her beautiful mask. “His soul has not been burned to a crisp by the world. You keep him if you can.” Then without another moment of conversation or opportunity for Rose to reply, Evelyn turned and strode away, her diaphanous, nearly translucent gown wafting about her, seeming to promise glimpses of her form to all who watched yet revealing nothing.

Keep him. She couldn’t keep him. She didn’t want anyone. It was too dangerous to want anyone. And that kiss, dear God, that kiss had nearly

undone her.

“Did you just make friends with Evelyn Turnbridge?” Derby whispered behind her.

“I think I might have done,” she whispered, not quite sure what to make of the whole thing.

“You be careful. She won’t like it if you betray her secrets.”

“I’ll be careful.” She wasn’t about to hurt someone like Evelyn Turnbridge, because clearly she was trying to look out for other women. But she wanted to know about the men who’d used Evelyn when she’d been on the game at such a young age. Those were the people she wanted to find out about.

She wanted to warn other young men from going down such a path. If she could but make people see the horrors of others losing their hearts and their souls. What had Evelyn said? Having their soul burned to a crisp? And then the ashes were blown away. Except the families remained upon the scorched ground. She looked up to Derby. “She said you’re different. Do you know her well?”

“Evelyn? I’ve known of her a long time, but I don’t know her well.” He gave her a pointed look. “And if by *well* you mean asking have I ever had her in my bed? No. I’m not given to paying a few thousand pounds a night.”

She nearly choked. “I beg your pardon?”

He nodded. “Evelyn Turnbridge charges whatever she pleases, and gentlemen will pay a fortune for a few hours in her bed.”

“Does she take anyone?” she asked, trying to make sense of his declaration.

“She takes anyone who will pay the right amount.”

“Even if they can’t afford it?”

He was quiet. “She gets the money where she can, just like the others,” he said. “Nobody too low because that would affect her reputation. But Evelyn cannot look out for fools who wish to throw their money away.”

“I see,” she said, blinking. How many fools had already lost their souls thinking that a night with a courtesan would somehow make them wanted, or special, or important? She could not blame Evelyn. Society was so cruel. For it told men that the only way to fill the hollows in their hearts was through drink, gambling, and women.

This was becoming more complex than she wanted it to be. But that was why she was here. So that she could write the horrors and the pain. Evelyn used men, but she had been used since she was born. And rakes. Rose looked

up at Derby. Perhaps there was more to some of them than there seemed, but she could not allow her thoughts to become muddy. She shook her head. “And now?”

“And now we go,” he said. “You’ve seen enough for your first night. And I’m afraid that you’ll either out us both or end up causing some sort of duel. Everyone is staring at you. The whispers are arguing that you’ve singlehandedly stopped a duel with your beauty. The two men in question are drinking brandy together, with a lady sitting on each lap. The courtesan in question has left. I think it is time we go home.”

He studied her. “I think I need to teach you about discretion,” he said softly.

“It seems to me,” she said, “discretion is the last thing a mistress truly wants.”

“But you are not a mistress.”

“No.” She wasn’t. But as she stared at Derby, his kiss drifted back into her thoughts. And she wondered what it would be like to surrender to an hour in his arms. But she would never give in to indulgence of emotion, for that way lay ruin.

Chapter Thirteen

Rose could not sleep. The wild, haunting taste of his lips still upon her mouth refused to abate. Oh no, it taunted her, whispering through her veins, longing for more. And as she lay on her bed in her small room with moonlight spilling in through the windows, she tossed and turned. Finally, she threw her arm up over her head and let out a sigh.

What was happening to her? In all her life, she'd never felt like this. She'd never felt such an ache, such a longing, such a desire to understand what was happening to her body. It felt as if she was liquid and made of flame, and only he could cure it. For it all seemed to stem from the place between her thighs. She found herself quite frustrated with the feel of her own linen nightgown upon her body, of the fabric of her bed about her. It was most frustrating. In all her life, she'd never experienced such sensations, and it was all because of *him*.

She could not tear her thoughts from him or from his lips upon hers. The madness of it coursed through her, stealing away all reason until, at last, the light of dawn began to slip through her window. She pushed herself up on the bed. She could not live like this, with this strange, forceful need inside her. Thinking of Derby's kiss, wishing for more, wishing to understand desire better.

She dug her fingers into the mattress and considered. Surely, if she could understand it, then she could make sense of it. And once she could make sense of it, she could write it down, and then it would be out of her. She'd no longer feel consumed by it. For all her troubles, once she wrote them down, were gone. That was the answer, wasn't it? It always had been.

Yes. If she was to experience this with him, it would be research, important research, so she could understand why so many people were willing to throw their lives away for such action, for this thing inside her that made her feel

completely afire. Part of her told her that she should tamp it down, ignore it, but she knew that pressure could make things worse. That was the point of a tea kettle's spout, for goodness' sake! If one did not relieve the pressure, well, it would boil and then burst. And she refused to burst apart.

No, she had always been a master of her own fate, and she would not stop now. She was no coward. So, as she swung her feet over the side of the bed, placed them on the cold wood floor, and crossed to the basin, she poured out frigid water into the porcelain and splashed her face. She poured it up and down her arms until its drops danced like little jewels over her skin. She shivered in the soft, buttery yellow light spilling in through her window. It was going to be a beautiful day in London, so unlike the winter. Yes, the warmth and full bloom of summer was now upon them. How she loved it, for it was what gave everyone hope to fight back the gloom of the dark months that would soon return.

She stood before the basin, its ripples stilling now. Biting her lower lip, she decided. This was her moment of exploration and understanding. That wasn't indulgence of emotion; it was the opposite. It was logical. If she was going to write this pamphlet, she was not going to hold back. She would understand him, and she would understand herself, and she would not hesitate.

...

A new face was seen on the scene last evening, the demimonde is pleased to report. She was a sparkling creature and no doubt shall become quite a fixture. Everyone shall follow her way of dress. Her hair was perfection, her gown divine, and she captured the attention of all when she managed to stop a duel between two gentlemen. Yes, whoever the elusive Madam X is, she is clearly going to be the next queen of the Cyprians, ready to take up her place with as magical of jewels as Evelyn Turnbridge.

Alexander lowered his news sheet, let out a groan, and climbed out of the coach. This was a disaster. He rushed up the stairs to Rose's room and banged on the door, and when she whipped it open, he was astonished to find she was still in her night rail.

Her cheeks were suddenly quite pink. "You are here early. Did we have such an appointment?"

"We do not, but it is imperative we speak, and I thought you liked to be seen early in the morning."

"Fair," she replied. "Do come in," she said, gesturing for him to enter. He

strode in, newspaper in hand.

“We have a problem.”

“Do we?” she said, distracted. “What is it?”

He blew out a breath. “You’ve been written about.”

“I have?” she yelped, seeming to abandon whatever had caused her to look so dreamy eyed.

“Look at this.” He thrust the news sheet into her hands. “I told you, you made a scene last night. Alas, you went a bit too far. Bloody hell, you were supposed to be there to observe, and instead now you are the toast of the demimonde,” he said.

She tsked. “You are overreacting.”

She took the newspaper, began to scan the lines, and let out a laugh. “How marvelous,” she said. “They don’t know who I am, though.”

“No,” he agreed, shocked by how she was taking it.

“And they won’t,” she said firmly.

“Hopefully.”

She shook her head. “You are worried for nothing, Derby. This is what happens when you’re an investigative type. Sometimes you do get noticed, and sometimes you do end up in the papers.”

“Have you been in the papers before?”

“Usually, it’s just my name stating that I’ve written the pamphlet,” she said honestly, picking up a shawl from a peg on the wall and tossing it about her frame, which did little to hide her curves. “But this is most interesting, and I will take great pleasure in adding it to my collection of interesting moments to put in the pamphlet.”

He ground his teeth. “Rose, are you taking this seriously?”

And then she whipped around to him. “Of course I’m taking this seriously,” she said. “I did not come to you on a whim, unless you have forgotten the importance of this work to me.”

“Forgive me,” he said, lifting his hands. “But I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“Hurt? You cannot protect me from such a thing. I’ve been hurt so entirely that I will never be who I was when we were children. My entire life is based upon being hurt,” she said.

His fingernails dug into his palms because he knew what she was talking about. And he hated that he couldn’t take it away.

She tilted her head to the side. “Do you dare to have the audacity to suggest I have not experienced pain and do not know how to manage it? That I can’t

see danger ahead? I have watched my entire life be pulled apart and brought down about me.”

“Rose,” he said. “I was...”

“Arrogant?” she offered more softly now as she folded her arms beneath her breasts. “Presumptuous? Privileged? Thinking that you know better than me?”

He stilled. “You’re correct. I *do* know better than you in some things, and you know more than I in others,” he said. “Forgive me.”

“I’m sorry, too,” she said, her shoulders easing. “I am being unkind to you when you are just looking out for me, and I realize that.”

“Thank you,” he said, exhaling his relief. Though he still harbored concerns, he was not her keeper. He had no authority over her or right to tell her what to do with her life, though he would still do every damn thing he could to protect her.

She frowned. “You came quickly.”

“I came the moment I read it.”

“You *care*.”

Those words were a punch to his gut. “Rose, *of course* I care.”

“Do not say of course, because if that is true, then why...”

Her words faded, and anguish shadowed her face. “What?”

She licked her lips. “All those years ago, why did you suddenly disappear from my life?”

He tensed. He couldn’t tell her the full truth, not truly. So he settled for most of the truth. “It was the best thing to do.”

“The best for who?”

“Both of us.”

“Why?”

He looked away, wishing so many things. Wishing he had not already had a reputation as a ladies’ man then. “Because I am the Earl of Derby and a rake with a reputation.”

“You’re *still* a rake with a reputation.”

“Yes. But now I am a powerful man and you are not a young lady on the marriage mart. Then, I could have added to the difficulty of your situation by associating with you.”

Her face fell as she took his meaning. “People might have thought you were going to ruin me, is that it?”

He gave a tight nod.

“And you don’t worry about that now?”

“No,” he said firmly, “because you are a young woman in possession of her independence. You are a writer, and it is clear you are not looking for a husband. And, of course, I won’t ruin you.”

“And if I asked you to?” she whispered.

He stilled, certain he had misheard her. “I beg your pardon?”

She lifted her chin and rushed, “If I asked you to ruin me, would you?”

“That wouldn’t exactly be ruination,” he said, the very idea of her invitation causing his body to burn with desire and his thoughts to spin, “if you *asked* me to, but Rose, please don’t say things like that.”

“Why?”

“Because,” he ground out.

She shook her head, clearly unwilling to relent easily. “Why, Alexander?”

The use of his given name upon her lips nearly stole his reason. And so he replied without restraint. “Because I *want* to.” Suddenly, the power of his own emotions raced through his body, his desire charging forward at the mere mention of her request for ruination. “Last night...I’m not just a rake, Rose. I want you.”

“I see,” she said. Her lips parted, and her stance eased ever so slightly as if her guard was being lowered just a touch. “And if I was to tell you I want you in turn, what would you say?”

“You told me not to be charming,” he said, half in agony, half wishing he could have what she was offering. “You told me not to be a rake. I don’t know what to do, Rose. You’re confusing me.”

“You’re confused because I’m confused,” she said honestly. “And I *need* to understand.”

“Understand what?”

“What’s happening to me,” she said, dropping her hands to her sides, her fingertips dancing along her night rail.

“And what is happening to you?” he asked, his breath slowing.

She closed her eyes for a moment and drew in a long breath, her ribs expanding against her thin night rail. “You make me feel—”

He longed for her to finish, but he forced himself to wait. To let her proclaim her needs. She opened her eyes, and her dark pupils were dilated, her gaze hungry. “You make me feel as if I could throw everything away. You make me want to understand what happens to my body and to my skin when you are near. You make me wish...”

His heart began to pound heavily against his ribs. "What?"

"You make me wish for a moment I did not have ideals or standards and that I could be just like you."

"And what is it," he said, "that is just like me?"

"Carefree," she replied, her voice full of longing.

"Oh, Rose," he began, unable to hide his ache. How he wanted to tell her that that was the opposite of who he was, that he lived his life carefully, that he helped as many people as he could, that he saw suffering around him everywhere. And the only way he coped with that was to choose joy at every opportunity.

"Don't ask me to ruin you," he rasped. "Not unless you mean it. And you have to understand the consequences."

"The consequence," she said, "is that I will understand people like you. I'll understand why anyone would be willing to take such a chance."

"And what happens if you can't stop?"

She snorted. "Don't be ridiculous. I'll be able to stop."

"Why?" he demanded, knowing he should turn and run. Knowing that he was on very dangerous footing. And yet he could not make himself go.

"Because I can stop anything I want to," she returned, clearly convinced by her own boast. "I've been in control my whole life, and I will never lose that."

"I should walk away right now."

"Don't walk away," she said firmly. "Stay. I want you to stay."

Chapter Fourteen

“I have a condition,” Derby rumbled.

That voice, low and rough, sent a jolt of desire through Rose, and now that she was giving herself permission to feel it, her legs trembled. “I beg your pardon?”

He took a step toward her, his great coat swinging about his long, powerful limbs. “I have a condition for me to do what you ask. Oh, did you think I was going to go over to the bed, lie down, and offer myself up to you like a feast?”

Her eyes widened ever so slightly at this interesting image.

“You did, didn’t you?” he said, with a slow, wolfish smile. “Rose, I am not that easy.”

“Well, I...” Her voice died off, uncertain of what to say next. “I didn’t mean for you to feel that way.”

He cocked his head to the side, causing his dark hair to dance against his chiseled jaw. “And exactly how was it that you meant for me to feel? Or did you think that any chance I can have a lady in bed, I will take her there?”

Rose cleared her throat. “I suppose I did, yes.”

“I can understand why you thought so, but here’s the thing,” he began, taking another step, his presence all but stealing the air out of the room. “You wish us to be intimate. Well, then we’re going to be intimate.”

“Good,” she said with a nod. And she began to pull at the ribbons at the neck of her night rail.

A low groan that sounded half feral tumbled out of him. “Stop, Rose. We could couple like that, hard and fast, and have it done in a few moments. You would not enjoy it much. Nor would I.”

That gave her pause. How long did it take exactly? “I want to understand what the nonsense is about.”

He closed the distance between them and tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. "Let me help you make sense of the nonsense."

She swallowed, even as she felt as if her entire body was coming entirely alive with him so near, with the boundaries falling away. "What is your condition?"

His gaze traversed her face and lingered on her lips. "I want you to read your poetry to me by firelight."

Her hand tightened on the ribbon at her throat, her toes but inches from his boots. "Why?"

"Because if we are close, you and I will be able to make love."

She scowled. "I don't want to make love," she said.

"Yes, you do," he said. "That is what you are asking for. You are asking to understand why people would throw themselves into the abyss for the pleasure that it can bring."

She stilled. "I suppose I am, yes."

He traced his fingers along her jawline. "Then you will do as I instruct."

"My poetry?" It was a request she had not expected, and she wasn't certain what to make of it. "Why that?"

"Because I wish to know you. The you that you have been hiding from the world. And then I will be able to show you exactly what you want."

She bit the inside of her cheek, uncertain now. She felt as if she was walking the edge of a cliff. One misstep could see her plunge to the rocks below. "I don't know if it's a good idea."

"You like plans and rules," he said, his gaze heating. "Let us be clear. We will be intimate for the duration of your research, but once we are done, you may go just like you wish and leave me behind."

She considered this, and though it felt dangerous, so very dangerous, she felt it worth the risk. She nodded.

"I will come back this evening," he said, "and you can read to me. And then..."

"And then?" she whispered.

"It will be the beginning. Do you agree?"

"I agree."

"Good." And with that, he backed away, turned, and walked out of the room, leaving her standing with anticipation humming through her veins.

...

Alexander stopped in the hall and closed his eyes. Had that truly happened? He leaned against the wall, half certain he was dreaming. But the city sounds drifting up from the street assured him otherwise.

She had asked him...to make love to her. And, bloody hell, he'd agreed. He was the worst of devils, and yet he could not deny himself this chance. For he knew Rose. He wasn't waiting till the evening just because it would be dark. He wanted her to be certain, because this was a turn she could not go back from him. He was not foolish enough to suggest that she not pursue it.

If this was what she wanted to do, she'd find a way to do it, just as she had been determined to find a way into the club. And if he was entirely honest, if there was going to be anyone, he wanted to be the one. He almost felt he was destined for it. Surely, fate had brought them back together. But if Oxford, all those years ago, had taught him anything, it was that the gods loved to crush those who reached too far for happiness.

He was reaching far too far.

Chapter Fifteen

Alexander arrived long after the sun had fallen.

Her candles, too small beeswax tapers, cast a soft golden glow about her room and Alexander, who lay upon her bed for he had claimed that spot easily, as if he belonged there. It was also the most comfortable place in the whole room, for she only had hardback chairs to sit upon. The bed was much like a divan, and he had had her sit beside him.

“Another,” he requested, his voice low as he lounged languidly in the candlelight. He had eschewed his coat and his waistcoat almost the moment he had arrived. In his linen shirt and his taut breeches, he looked like a god descended from Olympus, carefree, powerful, self-assured.

He dropped the parchment in his hands to the pile beside him.

“Another?” she queried, surprised. “Surely, that is enough.”

He tilted his head to the side, his dark hair caressing his cheek as his gaze studied hers. “It will not be enough, Rose,” he whispered, “until I have read every one. I want to devour them.” He took up her hand. “Just as I wish to devour you.”

The touch of his hand stole her breath, and she felt mesmerized in his gaze. Alive. Totally and completely alive. For the last hour, he had read poem after poem. He had read them aloud to her, and hearing those words in his voice? It had done the most astonishing things to her. He was clearly practiced at reading aloud. The words had poured out of him. Beautiful, smooth, liquid, full of emotion.

His consonants and vowels had spilled over her like caresses. Even now, as he looked at her, she felt the wonder in his gaze, and it did the strangest things to her body. She handed him one last poem. He took it and began to read.

““Oh, how the wind doth spin about me. Oh, how my body doth quake. It

longs for things unknown. It longs to be embraced. But I am like a fortress and cannot be touched. I cannot be shaken or moved. For I have stood beyond all time and cannot tumble down. I will not give way to the wilds of the wind, the call of the whispering wind as it tosses about me. For it is my will and my duty to know that I am unshakeable, unbreakable, and true.”

He lowered it and parted his sensual lips. “You do not have to break,” he said, his voice a low rumble, “to know the pleasure of the wind. The way it dances about one, the way it teases and plays and pushes and tumbles. You can bend, Rose. You do not have to tumble. All you have to do is sway.”

She knew that was what she was doing now. Here with him. She was not going to break; she was going to *sway*.

He placed the poem down, slipped his hand up to her cheek, then wove his hand into her hair and gently guided her face down toward his. “Come live with me and be my love, and we will all the pleasures prove,” he murmured. Marlowe’s poem swept over her and she gasped, now beginning to understand the seduction of it.

He kissed her with a slow, patient heat. Tentatively, she kissed him back. For though she had loved the feel of his lips upon hers, this felt different. This was a moment. This was a fork in the road. If she went down this path, there would never be any going back.

“You hesitate,” he said against her mouth.

“I am not hesitating but fortifying myself.”

He laughed softly, almost pained. “You do not need to fortify yourself in this moment. You need to surrender.”

Surrender?

Never. She could never give in; she could never give way. And yet in this she was going to have to. She was going to have to allow him to guide her, and she had not been guided in a very long time. Not like this. Not so intimately. Not where she felt so exposed.

He turned her, laying her back on the bed, and gazed down upon her face. She could not draw breath for a moment at the power in his eyes, the emotion there. She never let herself feel so evidently as he did. She tamped her emotions down, imprisoning them. And she felt wonder at his freedom. For a single moment, she wished she could have that sort of freedom. But she would never be able to, and as he lowered his mouth to hers, she decided that in this, just here with him, she would feel everything she could for as long as she could, because it would eventually have to end.

So she needed to memorize every bit of this. Every moment. Every touch. Every look.

He took her mouth, devouring it just as he had her poetry. His lips worked over hers, tantalizing, hypnotic, promising so much pleasure. Her body tingled with anticipation.

Now, with a seeming mind of its own, she began to arch against him, feeling an ache build between her thighs. His tongue ventured between her lips, tasting, teasing, delving. With sure fingers, he worked at her gown, pulling it past her shoulders, helping her to divest herself of all her garments quickly. He dropped them to the floor. "Perfection," he whispered, and his voice deepened as he continued Marlowe's poem as he took his time, teasing the curves of her body.

"That valleys, groves, hills, and fields, woods, or steep mountain yields. And I will make thee beds of roses and a thousand fragrant posies. A cap of flowers, and a kirtle embroidered all with leaves of myrtle."

His lips, his perfect, tempting lips, began to trace down her body, whilst his fingers slid along her waist where a kirtle was meant to sit. His mouth teased over the line of her neck, pressing softly at the curb and the hollow, then over her clavicles he traced his fingertips over her ribs as if he could memorize the curve of each one. And then his mouth was on her breasts. He teased her nipples with the tip of his tongue and then enveloped them in his hot mouth. She let out a cry of surprise. How could such a small thing feel so forbidden, so pleasurable? He did not stop his hand wandering over her, smoothing down her stomach as he paid worship to her breasts.

"So beautiful," he murmured. His fingertips trailed over her hips, skimming the thin skin there until he gently massaged her thighs, and then slipped his hands upward.

At the shocking sensation, her knees tried to lock together. But he murmured against her skin, "I promise I will stop if you do not like it."

She bit her lower lip and forced herself to relax. He stroked his fingers into her wet heat and began circling over some heretofore unknown spot of pleasure, teasing, unrelenting. The sensations were astonishing, defying all logic, until at last, her hands gripped his shoulders, and as he teased over her folds, she let out a cry, wild and amazed, as wave after wave of pleasure coursed through her, his name upon her lips.

He did not stop until he had wrung every last bit of bliss out of her body and she lay panting beneath him. Quickly, he whipped off his shirt, took off

his breeches and boots, and lay back down beside her. He gazed into her eyes, and she felt the evidence of his desire pressing into her hip. It was hard and long and strong, and she was astonished by its heat. Its velvety softness. *That* was going to be hers that was going to be *inside* her.

“You’re certain?”

She stared up at him, her breasts rising and falling with her short breath. And then she whispered, “Come live with me and be my love.”

His eyes lit then with desire and some emotion she could not quite name. Gently, he parted her thighs, locking gazes with her as he eased himself between her legs. The passion there, the emotion touched her heart, and then he rocked forward.

“It will hurt,” he whispered. “But it will only be a moment.”

She wanted to tell him she did not care. She was accustomed to pain, and she *wanted* this. She wanted this memory to last her whole life. And so she arched her hips upward, urging him on. “Please,” she whispered.

At her urging, he thrust forward, and the hard length entered her body. She flinched, and he hesitated for a moment. That hesitation seemed to take all his strength, all his power to hold back his passion. Now his body seemed rigid with need and hunger. He lowered his mouth to hers, taking her lips in a searing kiss.

Her arms wrapped around him, and instinctively she lifted her legs, wrapping her feet about his hips. That seemed to undo him, that instinctual welcoming of hers, and he began to rock his hips deeply against her, caressing her inside as he had without, not stopping until he found a spot within her she had not even known existed before *inside* her.

With each caress of his hard sex, deep in her body, she felt herself pitching upward, faster, more frantic, wilder than before. She could think of nothing but him and the pleasures he was giving her. He plunged deep within her, his body bringing her to the point of ecstasy, and she called out his name. Yet again.

She could no longer think. She could only feel...feel the power of their union and feel him all about her as if they were one. As he tensed, his entire body beginning to shudder with pleasure, he pulled out quickly. The hot evidence of his desire coursed against her body, and her name was rough upon his lips. Alexander lowered himself to her, his breath ragged, exhausted as if he had run around the world, and found himself back in her arms.

And that was where she wished he could always be: in her arms.

If only such things did not lead to pain, to sorrow, to misery. So she would simply have to enjoy this time with him and then swiftly let it go.

Chapter Sixteen

The private performance of *The Taming of the Shrew* was nothing like anything Rose had ever seen. She had not quite realized what the bard had intended with some of his comments about tongues and tails.

As she watched Kate and Petruchio on the stage now, she kept looking over at Derby and understood, for earlier his tongue had been in her *tail*. She was stunned to understand what the bard had meant. After the final scene with Petruchio and Kate, choosing love over everyone else, Derby slipped out to instruct the footman to bring his coach around.

The curtains of the small box swished open, and she turned, surprised he had returned swiftly. But it was not Derby. It was Evelyn Turnbridge. The courtesan sauntered in, placed a hand on the chair back, and looked down at her and smiled. “It does seem as if you have had a few experiences since I last saw you.”

She could not hide her grin, nor her chagrin at being caught. “You are astute.” Rose decided to play a card of her own. “It was you, wasn’t it?”

Evelyn cocked her head to the side. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“The newspaper. You put in the details, didn’t you? About me.”

Evelyn winked. “I thought perhaps you could use a hand up in this world,” she said.

Rose studied her carefully, trying to make sense of the powerful woman before her. “Is that what you were doing?”

Rose wasn’t entirely certain, for she feared Evelyn saw through her mask altogether.

“May I?” Evelyn asked, gesturing to the chair.

Rose nodded. “Please do.”

Evelyn sat in the chair next to her as patrons gossiped, wine was sold, and assignations were made. She leaned in and whispered, “I don’t know what

your game is. It's most interesting to me, and I want to see what happens. But I will say this: if you're going to hurt anyone in *my* game, well then, that's a different story."

She leaned forward and whispered back, "I'm not. I promise you that."

"Good," Evelyn said, clapping her hands together. "Then I shall support you in any way you need."

"Could you tell me more details?"

"About what?" Evelyn said, her brow furrowing.

"Rakes and how to manage them." She paused, then added, "And do you approve of what happens?"

"Oh dear," she said. "Were you raised in one of the convent schools or the reform schools? Are you having doubts about your position?" Evelyn patted Rose's hand. "I promise you that your position is a lucrative one."

"Tell me more about that," Rose urged.

Evelyn smiled at her. "A girl can make a good deal of money and lose it just as quickly if she is not careful. So you best keep ahold of your coin and your wits. Don't fall in love with Derby."

"Not a chance," she said quickly.

Evelyn quirked a skeptical brow. "Just be careful."

"And the young men who come to you with no money?"

Evelyn sighed. "There's enough heartbreak in this world for me not to add to it. My gentlemen are all rich as Croesus, but there are men who will wager a fortune for a single night. A fortune they should not. Some judge the mistresses for draining men dry. But you have to understand the girls in our line of work, they've seen hell. Haven't you?"

"Yes," she said honestly. She had seen hell, but she didn't want to tell Evelyn any more of it for it was a different sort of hell.

"With Derby," Evelyn whispered, leaning in, "you'll never see hell, if you can keep him. He'll be the loyal sort, you know."

"What do you mean?"

Evelyn gave her a knowing smile. "I've seen the way he's been looking at you. He'll never leave you if you wish it."

"What?" She was shocked. And for a long moment, the sound of that was heaven. But she knew such a thing could never last, not between someone like Alexander and herself.

"I've seen it in his eyes. He doesn't just want you, and I can see now that he's had you; it's more than that. You're in him like tattoos on a sailor's arms

down by the docks. He wants you, body and soul. You play that well, my dear, and you'll be set up for life, but make sure you get it all in writing."

She frowned. "What, like a marriage contract?"

Evelyn threw back her head and stifled a laugh. "Not like a marriage contract, but one that sets up your fortune, especially if you have any children. You don't want to be running off to Naples to have to bear children there in secret."

And for one quick moment, she was certain Evelyn had done such a thing.

"I'll take your words seriously," she said. Evelyn rose, smiled, and slipped out of the box.

"What was that about?" Derby asked, coming through the curtains.

"A bit of advice," she said. "But I can't tell which way the wind truly blows with her, if she's on my side or against me."

Derby was silent, then supplied, "Well, she doesn't know who you are, does she? She's no fool that one."

He slipped his hand into hers and wound their fingers together. "Perhaps, if Evelyn is suspicious," he said, "we should consider not going further."

"We've barely begun," she said, astonished, her heart beginning to pound against her chest.

"It might be too dangerous with that news sheet," he whispered against her ear.

She flinched, for she did not feel the pleasure of his lips against her skin but the fear of his abandoning her already. "Do you wish to end it all, then?" Panic began to well up in her. So much was at stake, her research, her pamphlet, the way she felt free in his embrace. "For you said once we ended the research, the intimacy would also be..."

He pulled her close, tilted her head back, and kissed her, not caring a whit who saw. And here, in this private theater, it mattered not at all. "I don't want anything to end. And if I have to let you go for the research to be done, then I shan't."

"Good," she said. "Because I'm not done yet."

...

Alexander could not let her go. His mouth swept over hers, possessed with desire for her and his wonder for the woman he had always longed for.

He managed to lift his face for the briefest of moments as they lingered in the box. He gazed down at her, his eyes tracing over her features. He longed

to make a picture of them in his soul so he would never be without her. He had been forced to be without her for so long, by his own promises, yet he never wanted to let her go again.

Passion hummed through him, and his thoughts raced. Before he could think twice, he took her hand, their fingers lacing, as he led her through the dark halls to a tucked-away alcove. He whipped the curtains around them, much like she had whipped a curtain around them at that first night in St. John's Wood. Yes, he tucked them into the dark shadows. Most of the people who had attended the performance had already departed. They were almost entirely alone in the theater. It was quiet, soft, a place of magic, a place just for them.

He pressed her against the wall, staring down at her face, waiting for her to urge him on.

She tilted her face back. "Kiss me," she whispered, her own eyes dark with passion.

He took her mouth with fiery hunger, as if he had been stoked, embers drifting upward.

His lips teased over her as his tongue touched the line of her mouth, and then he thrust his tongue, as he would thrust his cock later into her warmth. Their tongues teased and tempted as their hands roved up and down each other's bodies.

Hungry for every inch of her, he kissed the line of her throat, loving the gentle arch of it. His mouth rested on the place between her clavicles. He then skimmed his lips over the tops of her plumped-up breasts and let out a groan of pleasure before he dropped to his knees. He began edging her skirts upward, ever upward, exposing her delicate silk stockings and the delicate ribbons that tied them in place. How beautiful those ribbons were, teasing him with the promise of her body, like a present that only he could unwrap.

And as he stared at the V of her thighs, that beautiful place of bliss, he bit his lower lip, eager to give her pleasure. Her hands thrust into his hair. Rose let out a low moan of anticipation. He parted her thighs ever so slightly, and then he tilted her hips toward him and took her in his mouth. He teased her hot, wet folds with his lips and tongue unrelenting, unyielding, wanting to bring her such pleasure that she would never be able to forget him, never get this memory out of her mind. He wanted to bring her to pleasure, over and over, again and again until she cried out his name.

Her breath came in rapid takes as he urged her on, and then at last as his

tongue teased over her most sensitive spot, she pressed the back of her hand to her mouth, muffling her cry of, "Alex!"

Satisfaction rolled through him as she trembled against his body. Slowly, he stood and undid his breeches. He kept her skirts above her waist.

She stared at him, dazed. "Just like the play," she whispered, her mouth tilting in a mischievous smile.

"What?" he whispered back.

"Your tongue in my tail."

He laughed softly, a low rumble. "Shakespeare knew what he was about," he said. And then he whispered in turn, "Do you want me?"

She swallowed.

He could see the muscles in her delicate throat working.

"Now," she declared without hesitation. "Now."

He lifted her legs and helped her wrap them about his waist. He freed his cock and rubbed it against her heat. He was nearly done at the pleasure of that slickness, and then he rocked his hips home.

His cock slid into her body and the warm, taut sheath embraced him, making him feel as if he had found exactly where he belonged, where he would always belong. He bit back a groan of pleasure and lowered his forehead to the top of her head. Slowly, he began to rock and thrust, bracing himself. He held her tightly, ensuring she was safe and secure in his embrace. She began to moan, soft and low at the depth with which he filled her. Soon after, he could not hold himself back.

His body was alight with passion for her, and he gave himself over to it. He could tell by her ragged breath and the way she arched against him that she was near her pleasure. And then he tilted his hips, making sure he stroked her inside in just the right place. Her body tightened deliciously around his, wave after wave of pleasure wrapping about him.

Rose lowered her face to his shoulder, and on a note of sheer heaven, she called out his name again, muffling it in his coat. At that, he could bear it no longer. He thrust into her welcoming body again then, unable to stop himself, unable to hold back. He let himself go. The intensity of it washed over him, and his entire body shook as his release overtook him.

With her, he never wanted to hold back. Somehow, he had to find a way to keep her, because he did not think he could ever bear to let her go again.

Chapter Seventeen

Rose stifled a triumphant laugh as she slipped past the butler, the very one who had insisted that she would never, ever maintain entrance to the club. After all, she was not the type to be a courtesan, nor would she ever be seen as one! And yet here she was in full regalia and a gown created for her by the Duchess of Ashbridge heading into the elusive club right past the gatekeeper's nose. It was quite a thing to go full tilt and enter through the subtly elegant entrance rather than hefted out the side doors.

"What is it?" Alexander whispered, his brow quirking with curiosity.

"Oh, nothing," she replied, smiling. "I am merely enjoying the fact that tenacity, hard work, and determination always rewards."

He tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. "With you, of course it does. Who could stand in your way?"

"Certainly not a butler," she said, savoring his nearness, for she knew this would not last.

He laughed. "Never. Never anyone, not even a duke or a prince."

She tilted her head. "You flatter me, sir."

"Truth is not flattery," he returned easily, leading her across the marble floor. "I should never wager against you, Rose."

He led her through the crush of the cavernous foyer. She gazed about, astonished. There was beauty everywhere. The gowns of the courtesans ranged in every color, from bright pink to the color of the sea to crimson red. Her gown was a soft, bright gold, as if to denote she was a creature of joy and luxury. It skimmed her body just as the other had done, and at any moment, she was fairly certain that someone would shout, *She is nude!* For it certainly felt thus.

And yet she had begun to enjoy it, the freedom of it, the pleasure of it. The way the silk caressed her skin like a kiss, like his kiss. It made her want him

in this moment. It made her wish to drag him into another room and have her way with him. She shook her head, trying to take it all in. “I don’t understand.”

“What is it?”

She considered how to say it without offense. “From this place? I expected —”

His eyes widened with understanding. “You expected to see something else entirely, did you not?”

She gave a tight nod. Suffering. She’d expected to see the sort of wreck and ruin she had witnessed with her father and the descent that brought about stays at the Lock or Fleet Street prison, but what she now realized was that the suffering was not apparent in these places. Oh, there were moments like the young man and the duke at the previous house in St. John’s Wood. But this? This temple of luxury, which was even more exclusive than the last, everything was different.

In this club, everything was beautiful. The rooms were covered in the most perfect watered silk. Stucco had been arranged in artistic scrolls and patterns along the ceiling. Gold gilded many surfaces, and music filled the rooms. Delicious, light music. The strains of Bach filled the air. Dancing was taking place in a room off the main foyer.

But they were not here for that. Oh no. Tonight, he had brought her to Evelyn Turnbridge’s salon. For at this club, Rose had been astonished to learn that the great, powerful courtesan held court. Here was the place that people came to bask in her glow. Here, Evelyn appointed the next great courtesans, suggesting who was to be the new jewel of the year.

And she also selected the great thinkers of the day, the great artists, too, which apparently was why Alexander liked this club so well. It was where he often came to discover people to give patronage to. As they slipped into the salon, crushed with gentlemen hanging on the word of the ladies present, she found herself frowning.

“Again, I don’t understand it,” she protested, feeling frustration simmer beneath her skin.

“Can I help?” he asked sincerely as he guided her through the crowd.

“Why are courtesans given so much privilege and power and wives are relegated to nothing?” she whispered.

A look of complex dismay crossed his face. “It is a tragedy,” he agreed. “Wives are not often allowed to be full people,” he said. “But if you look

about, you will see that the women here are treasured not for their ability to give birth to children who will inherit wealth, land, and titles. They are valued for themselves, for their intellect, for their wit, for their ability to speak languages, to play instruments, and to entertain. The gentlemen here are not looking for someone to carry on their lineage. They are looking for equals, for intellectual conversation, and for boldness. Since wives are not necessarily supposed to be creatures of pleasure, this is where they come.”

“It’s wrong,” she said firmly. A whole swath of women relegated to nothing.

“I agree, and I would never want...” He paused.

“Yes?”

He blew out a breath. “I could never want a woman in my life to have to restrict themselves so entirely to thinking themselves only as a breeder.”

“Then you shall be a good husband,” she said simply.

He gave a tight nod and looked away.

“You’ll have to marry.”

“All earls marry,” he said tightly as if he did not wish to discuss it.

She grinned up at him. “I wonder who you shall marry.”

He was silent for a long time, then without addressing her comment said, “Come.”

He led her down to the front of the room.

She was surprised he had said nothing about marriage. After all, he was of an age for it. Surely, he’d be doing it this year or next. But the thought caused the strangest feeling to race through her, and as he escorted her to the front of the room where gentlemen were beginning to sit, he said, “Will you not read it yourself?”

Her eyes flared, and she had to fight the urge to retreat. “No,” she declared firmly. “I still can’t believe I’m letting you do it.”

“I’m grateful that you are. I want you to see,” he said, his eyes darkening with emotion. “I want you to see that your poetry might change more lives than all your lecturing.”

“I do not lecture.”

He laughed. “Oh, Rose, I adore you and all your petals, and all your thorns and all your lectures, but you might find that the rose all together draws more change than just the prick of a thorn.”

“We shall see,” she said swiftly. “I’m not convinced.”

He lowered her into a chair, then went up to Evelyn Turnbridge and

whispered into her ear.

The courtesan cocked her head to the side, causing her dark curls to tumble over her shoulder, glanced Rose's way, and then gave a nod and a smile.

This had not been something she thought could occur. Her poetry had been hers and hers alone. But in his arms, in her bed, she had allowed herself to be convinced to have this work read in public. She did not want anyone to know that Rose Digby had written it. No, Rose Digby wrote sensible things. Things meant to encourage those to choose a better path and to expose the cruelty of this world, to expose those who used others.

Poetry was something else entirely. Poetry had always been a gift of the gods meant for higher things and emotions rather than practicalities. And so as the room began to settle and Evelyn clapped her beautiful, slender hands, her sapphire rings dancing in the candlelight, she called all forward.

"We have a new work to be read this evening," she announced. "The Earl of Derby shall read it, for the author is too shy to do it themselves."

Shy, she thought. She'd never been accused of being shy. Embarrassed was probably a better word, and she wondered if Evelyn knew, but she kept herself quiet. The room stilled.

The Earl of Derby took up a place before the audience and read from a piece of paper that he pulled from his pocket. "Lovebirds are foolish creatures. They spin about each other looking for each other's company. But the lovebird is chased by the predator. The beast hungers for the lovebird and will crush it in his jaws. He pursues it, for it is the nature of the predator to hunt, to chase, to kill, to make the lovebird suffer. The lovebird does not see the suffering on the horizon, but it shall never be faster than the sinuous muscles of the clever stalker. The hunter shall come out of the darkness and lay waste to the lovebird. Its heart, its tender heart, which always longs for love, shall cease to beat. It shall coo its last coo and lose sight of its mate, who shall forever be lost and alone after. And the hunter, the ravenous chasing creature, shall prowl waiting, waiting to crush love in its jaws."

The room was silent for a long time, and then the applause began, and she began to hear whispers.

"The allegory to life, suffering, loss," someone said passionately.

"I am very moved," another man said. "It is as if they understand how much I lost when Mary was taken from me."

"Yes," another man said. "To lose love, to have it torn away from one..." He looked away and could not continue.

Rose was shocked. The whispers all around her... There was a catharsis, a solidarity at the suffering cited in the poem. Was Alexander correct? Could her poetry be some sort of catharsis to help others move through their pain and their suffering rather than to deny it and shove it down? She did not know.

“Is that your work?” someone asked just behind her.

She tensed and whipped her gaze to the man speaking. He was tall, austere, and dark-eyed, and she gasped, for it was the novelist Norton Wildcot. “Why would you say such a thing?” she asked rather rudely.

“Because you came in with the Earl of Derby,” he said, smiling sadly. In general, the fellow seemed rather melancholy before he continued with kindness. “And you would not read it.”

“Yes,” she confessed, her nerves prickling. “It is mine, but please don’t tell anyone.”

“Oh, I won’t,” he rushed, pressing his hand to his heart beneath his dark waistcoat. “I understand authors and the need to be anonymous.”

“I imagine you do. You are Mr. Wildcot.”

“I am,” he replied, genuinely surprised she had spotted him. “Have you read my books?”

“I have read them all,” she said honestly, having a deep admiration for his serious work. “I recognize your sketch from the news sheets.”

“Oh my,” he said, all but blushing. “Has the earl offered his patronage for your poems?”

She straightened, realizing she was on dangerous ground. She could not reveal too much about herself. Not yet. “He is my keeper,” she said.

Mr. Wildcot’s brow furrowed, and he leaned toward her, for he was quite tall, bringing to mind a willow tree. “I feel like there is more to this story. But if he is your patron, you are lucky indeed, because he’s a good man. He always makes certain I am taken care of, that I have nothing to fear. And when I am deep in my melancholia, as I often am, and I think that you are too from that poem, he is there for me whenever I need someone to remind me that the darkness passes.”

She swung her gaze to Alexander. “He does that?”

“Oh yes,” he said. “He is the strongest man I know. He is my anchor. He is the anchor of many. And I think he will be your anchor, too, if you but let him.”

If she but let him. That was the trick, wasn’t it? She caught Alexander’s

gaze. He smiled at her across the room and mouthed, "You see?"

She smiled. She could not stop herself, and yet as Wildcot slipped away from her, his words lingered in her ears. "If you but let him..." She doubted her heart ever could, for it had seen the cost when one allowed love in. When one let go with a man who loved the pleasures of life.

Chapter Eighteen

“He’s here again, my lord.”

Alexander threw his arm over his face, let out a groan, and cursed the heavens. The guilt and the lies were growing exponentially. He didn’t want to groan again, but he couldn’t stop the note of frustration escaping his lips.

“Should I tell Mr. Digby to go?” his butler ventured.

“No, don’t do that.” Alexander couldn’t punish his friend, and his friend would feel thus if he sent him away. After all, he’d had enough difficulty with being shamed by the earl’s family without Alexander doing such a thing to him. He flung himself out of bed, dressed as quickly as he could, and bounded down the stairs.

“Ready for another round?” Digby called.

“Of course,” Alexander proclaimed, even as he felt a wave of unpleasantness at the mask he was wearing. The pressure of his faux joviality made him feel a trifle sick. “When am I not?”

Digby’s eyes narrowed with concern. “You look as if you have been through the bloody wringer, man.”

“I’ve been keeping late nights,” he said honestly, not willing to think of what had been keeping him up so late. For he could not bear thinking of how he was betraying his best friend.

Digby clapped him on the back. “You’re going to look old before your time.”

“Me? Never,” Alexander drawled, trying to seem carefree, but he felt strained to his core.

And just as he was about to suggest they take a cup of coffee before heading out onto the road and out toward Hampstead Heath, hopefully not Scotland, the front door swung open without ceremony and his grandmama entered like a ship at full sail.

Her skirts, which were more prone toward the turn of the last century, yet beautifully made, blazed behind her, as did her hat with a veil upon it. She ignored Digby completely, strode up to Derby, and offered her cheek.

“My boy,” she intoned.

Derby flinched. It was the expectation to give way to the dowagers of the world, and so he did it as expected. He leaned in, kissed his grandmama upon her lightly powdered cheek, and managed to get out, “A pleasant surprise.”

“Don’t lie, boy,” she tsked, batting him on the shoulder. “You do it rather well, though.”

He did. He knew he did. He swung his gaze to Digby, wondering if his friend knew it, too. Digby laughed. “Too much practice, then.”

His grandmama swung her gaze to the vicar’s and narrowed her eyes. “You. What are you doing here?”

The note in his grandmother’s voice nearly caused him to speak afoul of her. “Grandmama, you must not speak thus to my friend.”

“Your friend, is it?” she said, adjusting the veil of her hat. “Well, my dear, you have always been liberal-minded, and for that I praise you. I am from an older school of things where we knew our places. Now, these days, everyone wishes to mix above their station and below.”

Digby tensed. “Forgive me,” he said. “I should go.”

“No,” Alexander called out. “You should not. You were here first. And she loves to give everyone difficulty.”

His grandmama pursed her lips, then sighed. “I suppose that is true. You were never a bad boy, Digby. I rather liked you trouncing into my house with mud on your boots, if you must know, brandishing your frogs and things. Forgive me for being a grumpy old woman in the morning. It’s been a long journey, and I have things to say to my grandson. Trot along now.”

With that, Digby looked from him to her.

Alexander let out a groan. “Grandmama, I’m a grown man.”

“Yes, you are, my dear,” she replied. “Now, where shall we discuss the matter at hand?”

“Discuss what?” he said, frowning.

“Your marriage.”

He felt himself nearly fall through the floor.

Digby coughed in sympathetic horror. He gave a quick bow and started edging backward. “I shall depart. After all, such things should be kept within the family.”

Alexander longed to call out to Digby for a lifeline, but he knew such a thing would be impossible. "Come again tomorrow morning?"

"You know I will," Digby assured before suddenly offering, "or perhaps boxing later?"

"Boxing, it is," he agreed, relieved not to fob his friend off entirely.

When his friend departed, he gave the old woman he loved a hard stare. "Grandmama, you must not speak so to Digby again."

His grandmama pulled off her gloves, let out a sigh, and shrugged her shoulders as if she was a bothersome creature and she knew it. And reveled in it. But he simply had to take her as she was. Largely, he did. "Why did you have your claws out for him?" he asked. "Right away. He never did you any harm."

"You're right, of course, my boy, but I don't like you associating with that family. Families often carry these sorts of things."

He began to protest, but she lifted her gloves and wagged them about. "The father, the difficulties, the melancholia, that horrible business with those women and your father having to cast them out. It was terrible."

Yes, it was. He could still remember that night, the scandal, the difficulty of it all. And yet it was no fault of Rose or her brother. He wished his grandmama would see that more than anything. But the truth was they were so far beneath his grandmother's notice he was almost astonished she remembered them at all. It was only because of the difficulties, only because of the shame that such a man had lived on their property for a period that had kept them in her memory.

Artists were, of course, meant to get up to nefarious things, but they weren't meant to put themselves into Fleet Prison for debt when under the patronage of a great man. And then to go further, to shame their whole family through complete debauchery.

"You've come a long way, so shall we go into my study?"

"Indeed, my boy," she replied, heading to said study.

As he strode after her, he stated, "I have no idea what you are talking about, Grandmama. I have no intention of marrying this year or for the next several."

"I don't care what your intentions are, my dear," she declared without looking back and crossing into the room that had once been her husband's refuge. "Acts and actions are far more important. You need to marry. You need to marry soon. And I have already begun talking with the young lady's

family.”

“You’ve done what?” he ground out, hardly believing his ears.

She harrumphed. “Clearly, you’re not going to take any initiative on your own, and these things are usually arranged by the family anyway. And your mother and father are dead, so I’ve decided to take it upon myself to do it for you.”

“Grandmama, you have no place,” he began, longing to rail at her but not able to do so given his affection for her. “I am the earl. I am grown. I am capable.”

She rolled her eyes. “You are too busy frittering your time away on writers, musicians, and, well, the life that you lead.”

She sounded shockingly similarly to Rose. “Grandmama, you like artists and musicians and writers. It’s why Papa was such a patron.”

“Yes, my dear,” she agreed drily. “Our entire family are patrons to the arts. I think it is incredibly important to bestow the world with beauty. But one must also know when it is time to cut the rope and do the deed. It’s time for you to stop your seed sowing. You know that you can have a mistress once you’re married.”

“Grandmama, I do not wish—”

“My dear boy,” she cut in, clearly having lost her patience, “I think Lady Penelope will be perfect for you. She’s intelligent, witty, fun, loves the theater, and her mother had four boys and three girls.”

He shuddered at the idea of seven children. But the truth was Lady Penelope’s mother and father, the Earl and Countess of Carlton, were deeply happy. Lady Penelope was an excellent choice. It was difficult to find an immediate argument except for the fact that he did not wish to marry and such a limp excuse sounded like a pewling boy.

He drew in a long breath, determined to speak evenly. “Grandmama, you have clearly spent a great deal of time thinking of someone who would suit me.” If one was to look simply at facts, he and Lady Penelope would be a marvelous match. But he didn’t want Lady Penelope.

“Oh dear,” his grandmama said suddenly, her eyes widening with a mix of anticipation and horror as if the next moment could be the most miraculous or most hellish.

“What?” he said.

She pinned him with an assessing stare. “You’re in love.”

“I am not.”

“Oh, dear God, my boy,” she exclaimed, clasping his shoulders. “Do tell me who it is so that I can speak to her family at once.”

He was quiet.

“Worse,” she whispered before saying with some drama, “oh, please tell me it’s not a shop girl like the Duke of Ashbridge. Such things can be done by Americans, my boy, or even the Duke of Montrose and his bookseller. But, good God, must we descend into such chaos? I’m beginning to be concerned about the friends you keep and Digby—” And suddenly his grandmama stilled. “Who is it?”

“I’m not going to tell you, because I’m afraid you’ll find them and tear them to ribbons.”

Her mouth dropped into an innocent O. “I would never do such a thing. I would have someone do it for me.”

He let out a laugh. “Grandmama, I adore you, but sometimes you’re impossible.”

“Only sometimes? Then I am failing,” she said, smiling up at him. “My love, it is time you do your duty, and if you have fallen in love with someone who is inappropriate, well, you know what you must do.”

“Marry them?” he said. “Do the right and honorable thing?”

“Of course not, my dear,” she scoffed. “The right and honorable thing is to marry someone of your class, to consolidate our assets, and to ensure the nobility. Our line has been around for more than five hundred years. You can’t go throwing that away. No. You ask the girl to be your mistress, and you keep her on for the rest of her days. Have children with her, build her a house, do whatever makes you happy, but you marry Lady Penelope and your heirs are hers. That is all there is to be said to it. I shall send a letter to Lady Penelope’s mother, and you shall go over to tea this week.”

“Grandmama,” he said firmly. “I shall not.”

“Dear boy,” she said gently, “you may have your moment of resistance. I understand we all must resist our duty. But it has been too much time. This indulgence of yours, over your father’s death, over your mother’s death, it must stop,” she said. “You are not a child anymore.”

“I haven’t been a child for a long time,” he said tightly.

“Perhaps not,” she said, “but you must at last start acting like the earl that you need to be, not just like the earl you want to be.”

“You mean like Papa?” he bit out. “Who threw out Digby’s father? Who let his children suffer?”

“Yes.” She met his gaze, quite serious now. “And don’t pretend as if I don’t know what you did once you became the earl.”

He swallowed. Did his grandmother know truly what he’d done? He wasn’t ashamed of it, but he had kept it a secret. Or so he’d thought.

She shook her head. “We won’t speak of it now. I know you did what you thought was right, and it was kind of you. But you must let go of things like that. Have your foundations, raise money for writers and artists, spend as much as you choose of the fortune on beautiful new things and music. The only way to keep that, my dear, is to marry well. And you know it.”

His grandmother skewered him with hard truth. “You must ally with a great family. Unite our wealth. Keep it together. That is the only thing that you can do and the only thing that you should consider. If you care about all those people whom you take care of, you shall keep your power, not let it fritter away as so many have done over this foolish thing called love.”

Love... Was he in love?

If he was, it did not matter. For Rose would never love him back. And yet he could not bring himself to marry Lady Penelope, not when Rose walked this earth.

Chapter Nineteen

Hours later

Alexander had no idea how he was going to foist his grandmother off on some other subject, but he had to. He was not about to marry Lady Penelope. And as he circled the boxing ring with his friend, Digby, he focused on the vicar's face.

Pulling all his lies together was beginning to feel like a piece of art that simply refused to come together. As a matter of fact, the paint was spattering everywhere, and he was not entirely certain he could keep this up. The strain was immense, and he could only be grateful for the fact that surely Rose's pamphlet would be done soon. But worse, that meant, of course, that he would no longer be in her company.

And as that thought rattled through his brain, Digby struck him with a hard right cross. He staggered for a moment, came back, and threw with huge force, a left jab. He managed to get Digby right in the nose.

Digby's eyes flared, filled with water, and he shot backward. "What the hell was that, man?"

"What's a vicar doing saying hell?"

There was something in Alexander that felt particularly cornered at this moment, between the moral superiority of his friend, between his grandmother insisting he marry immediately, and Rose, who wanted him for a particular use, but not the real one that he wanted.

He felt pulled at all seams. And just as he was about to let out a roar and take up the fight in truth, a voice called across the boxing hall, "Derby, you're mad, man. Will you face me in the arena instead of a poor clergyman?"

He swung his gaze toward James, Duke of Ashbridge, an American captain who was a shipping magnate and who had managed by the wildest of odds to

inherit a dukedom. Digby, though he was a vicar, did not ignore the moment. He pummeled his fist straight into Alexander's stomach. The air whooshed out of him.

"Low blow." Alexander groaned.

James bounded up to the boxing ring, braced his arms on the ropes, and let out a laugh. "You should have seen that one coming, though, shouldn't you, my friend?"

"Hello, Vicar," James called to Digby.

The two had never met, and Alexander was out of breath. He pulled his fists up, began circling again, and Digby joined him going round.

"How goes the pursuit of pleasure," James asked, "with that young writer of yours?"

He tensed.

"Writer?" Digby asked, his voice pitching up and his eyes growing alert.

James wagged his brows. "You haven't heard? Alexander is helping a writer with some fantastic cause. My wife was onto me all about it this morning. Young, important, helped us out with an important cause."

Digby stilled, his gaze turning ice cold and all friendly ease vanishing from his stance.

"James, you don't need to tell everyone everything," Alexander said.

James cocked his head to the side. "Why not? Formidable creature that one. Just the right sort for you. Absolutely your opposite, which means you two will be a dream together."

Digby's eyes flared. "You are not talking about Miss Digby, are you? Miss Rose Digby?"

James cocked his head to the side. "How did you know? Have you read her work? She's positively marvelous. If it wasn't for her, my wife and I would've never made it together. It would've been a horrible situation. I would've sailed back off to the Americas. She would've stayed here in England, and a love that would counter the greatest of all times and all poetry would've been foolishly lost because my wife and I are both incredibly stubborn creatures."

Digby did not smile as James thought he would.

"What have I said?" James asked, swinging his gaze back and forth between the men.

"James," Alexander began as the floor felt like it was opening up beneath him. "You are usually sensible, and you keep yourself out of other people's

business. I don't know what love has done to you. Your wife clearly made you very happy this morning, but you have managed to—"

But before Alexander could put out another word, Digby charged at him, tossing his body back onto the ropes. His friend pummeled him.

"Cease!" James shouted. "Damnation! Rules man, rules! You're a man of the cloth."

Alexander did not even bother to fight back. Why would he? He had done exactly what he was not supposed to do. He had broken his vows and was going to take the punishment.

He allowed Digby to land blow after blow. James jumped over the ropes and rushed at them, grabbed Digby, and hauled him back.

"You don't understand," Digby growled.

"Doesn't matter if I don't understand," James countered, straining to hold the big man. "You are English. You're supposed to play by the rules, and you're a vicar."

Digby swung a glance to James that looked as if he might murder all of them. "Miss Digby is my sister, and that man vowed never to touch her or to be in her company because he's an absolute scoundrel."

James let out a groan, but he did not let Digby go. "I see. Ah, I have really made a mess of it. But on the upside, he's in love with her, you know?"

"What?" Digby ground out.

James gave him a shocked look. "How could you possibly not know he's in love with your sister?"

"I am not," Alexander retorted.

James snorted. "You don't know that you're in love with his sister?"

Alexander shoved himself up from the ropes, his ribs burning with agony. "I'm not in love with his sister. Don't say anything so absurd. I am merely helping her with the research of a pamphlet."

Digby's face fell. "So it's true. You have been associating with her, helping her in her endeavors even when I told you to stay away."

"She is an independent woman, Digby," Alexander said evenly as shame began to creep through him. Shame at being caught out in such deception. And the disappointment on his friend's face was gutting. "I'm helping her. She came to me, and you should be grateful that I am because—"

"Grateful?" Digby cut in. "Grateful you lied to me? How long have you been working together?"

"A few weeks," he said, honestly, though he knew nothing could save him

now.

Digby's chest rose and fell in harsh breaths. "So when I came to you and we went on that walk, you knew then, didn't you?"

Alexander was silent. Dark emotions washed over him, the reality of letting his friend down harrowing.

Digby nodded, but the look on his face was one of resigned disgust. "Not only are you a waste, you're a liar."

Again, Alexander said nothing. There was nothing he could say.

James let out a sigh. "Men do mad things in the name of love."

"Mad?" Digby barked. "You want to know about mad? My father was a rake just like that one over there. And he literally went mad. Derby will likely go mad, too, if he's not careful. They all have some degree of madness about them when they can't control themselves."

"I *do* control myself," Alexander said.

His friend laughed drily. It wasn't a pleasant sound. "Do you? Do you truly? When is the last time you did your duty? I'd like to know."

"I take care of—"

"No," Digby cut in ruthlessly. "I didn't ask how much money you donate to things. I didn't ask how many foundations you have formed. I didn't ask any of those questions. I asked when the last time you were a man of honor and a man of duty, because right now all I can see is someone who corrupts a young woman."

"I did not corrupt her."

His friend's eyes narrowed. "And what exactly did you do? Have you been like a monk staying away from her, or is it as I fear?" A muscle tightened in his jaw, and the tension between them was so thick, he feared one could cut it with a knife. "Have you ruined her?" Digby demanded.

"No. Not ruin."

"I don't want to know." His friend looked away. "I can tell from your face that you're guilty. But what I do want to know is what you're going to do about it."

James eyed them both as if the answer was obvious. "Well, he's going to marry her, of course. He loves her."

Alexander groaned. "She won't have me even if I asked her."

Digby's lip curled. "I shouldn't let you have her even if you asked her. But you understand what you are doing? If something happened, if she became with child, good God. Will you leave her to some alley, or Naples, or—"

“Enough,” he said quietly, coldly, unable to bear his friend’s disdain any longer.

“What?” Digby challenged. “You need to leave her alone. Now.”

He shook his head, torn. “I can’t.”

“She’s my sister, and you made a vow to me.”

“Is the young lady a child then or incapable of speaking for herself?” James asked bluntly.

A note of frustration escaped Digby’s throat. “You’re an American. You have no idea of how things work here.”

“Oh, I have a fairly good idea,” James said. “I have a ward, and I have to take care of her. My wife and I had to marry because of burgeoning scandal, though I loved her then. And I have had to navigate aristocracy, good sir. So I do think I have an idea of it. And you are acting like an overprotective nanny goat.”

Digby’s mouth turned to a hard line. “Perhaps you should see my father in his grave if you think I’m being so overprotective of my sister. Yes, she’s independent. Yes, she’s fierce. But that one,” he ground out, pointing at Derby, “he’s a charmer and a seducer. And I thought he was my friend and that he would stay away from my sister.” He pinned Alexander with a hard stare. “I have done the greatest wrong in being friends with you. Now, release me so I can leave. I have no desire to go to the gallows for murdering an earl.”

James let Digby go.

“Do the right thing. Leave her completely alone,” Digby said gravely.

“She wants me to keep it secret,” Alexander said, his voice low.

“But secrets like this, Alexander?” Digby bit out. “They don’t stay buried. It’s going to get out that you’ve been with her, that you’ve been close to her, that you’ve been intimate with her. It will get out. And then what will she do? What will you do? Our name will be all over.”

“And that is what you’re concerned about, isn’t it?” Alexander asked. “That your name will be besmirched. The good vicar?”

Digby let out a low sound of disgust. “My reputation has been dragged through the gutter by my father. And if you think I’m afraid of my sister doing the same to me, you’re a fool.”

He turned and strode from the room. Alexander’s guts twisted as he watched his friend go. What had he done? He’d known the risk. He’d taken it. And now he had to pay the price.

James crossed to him. "I am sorry. I had no idea."

He shook his head. "This is not of your making. It is mine. I never should have agreed to the lie."

"Why did you lie to him?" James asked.

"To protect him." Bitter gall crept up his throat.

"That one doesn't need protecting," James said. "But he does seem to live in a bit of an ivory tower with his head out of reality if he thinks he can protect Rose from the real world."

"And that's why I decided to help her," Alexander said. "Because I knew if I didn't, someone else would. I wanted to keep his friendship, too."

"By lying?" James said.

"By not telling him."

"By lying," James said more firmly.

He winced. "Have you never tried to protect someone with a lie?"

James nodded his head. "I did omit with Lily, so perhaps I can understand. But it's quite a mess you're going to have to clean up." He paused. "You should ask the lady to marry you. Not because of some hypothetical scandal. You should ask her because you love her."

"She won't say yes," he said as he thrust his hand through his hair. "She thinks I'm—"

"What?" James prompted.

He sucked in a breath. "Unworthy."

"And are you?" James asked softly.

It was the coldest, hardest question he'd ever been asked. And he turned his gaze to the man who he called friend and blinked. "I don't know."

James shrugged. "Well, there you have it, my friend. Until you know, then you are in quite a predicament. But you're going to have to figure out exactly how to manage this because as much as I don't think I like the vicar over there, he's not wrong. The truth almost always outs. It did for me. It did for Lily. And it will likely for you and Rose as well."

James hesitated and then, clearly hating to add more fuel to a crackling blaze, said, "We noticed the gossip in the news sheet. The sketch? Someone will realize that it's her, and then she will be in great difficulty. You will have helped her to do that. So clean up your mess. Perhaps Digby is right. Since you are so certain of her answer, and you refuse to see what sort of man you truly are? You should leave her be."

The words burned through him like poison. Leave her be? When he had

finally got her back in his life? He could not. He needed her like the wave needed the shore. He refused to let her go. Not yet. Not if there was some way, any way, to keep her.

Chapter Twenty

Rose dropped her quill into the ink jar. She took in the final words of the document. The pamphlet was almost done. There were only a few more details she needed from the club, the place she was supposed to go with Derby, the last place to finish her work, and her heart sank.

She did not want to give up his company. She had not realized how desperately she had begun to savor it, the feel of being in his arms. He had warned her. Would she be able to control what she felt for him? Would she give it up? Of course she would. Like anyone, there would be a difficult period in which she felt the unpleasantness of separation, and then she would move on, for she had the strength of will to do so.

She would not think of him again.

She would not allow feelings to color her passion or her life's work. Such feelings led to destruction. She looked to her window, stood from her desk, and crossed to it. She placed her hand on the windowpane, that transport to the world outside, and stared out at the cacophony of people who were trying to live their lives.

She loved this part of London, for it was not the most exclusive part, nor was it the poor part, but many intermingled here, and she loved seeing the vast array below. But here was the truth, the genuine truth of it all. She had loved him for so long. She had wanted him to be hers when she was a girl, but he had chosen such a different path, and he had left her, abandoned her, and he always would.

It was the sort of person that he was. He was going to leave her when the pamphlet was done, he had made that clear, and he would go back to being the rake that he was. He would not be the great man she knew he could be. Likely, he would marry, have heirs, and continue on, from night to night, staying out until dawn. Oh yes, he would support people and the arts and

facilitate conversations, which she knew was important, so important, but he could do so much more if he just believed and acted.

The pounding on her door caused her to jump. She cursed herself. She was wishing Derby to be someone he wasn't. That was the ultimate act of a fool, and she refused to be foolish. She had refused to be foolish since that day she and her brother and mother and father had been cast out of their house on Derby's estate.

She crossed the door and called, "Who is it?"

"Someone who wishes to know why you are acting so insensibly."

She startled. She knew that voice. It struck a chord deep within her. It echoed through her bones for it had been a constant voice in her childhood, one she had admired. Rose pressed her head to the door. Dear God, what had brought this about? She turned the handle and opened it. "Lady Derby?"

Derby's grandmother stared at her for a long moment. "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"Do I have to?" Rose asked.

The older woman pursed her lips. "Well, you can keep me on your doorstep, and we can have the conversation here, if you would prefer."

She let out a sigh. "Come in. You were always kind to me, so I will not be unkind to you now and tell you to hie off."

"How noble of you, my dear," the dowager drawled. Her face softened. "But I have not always been kind to you. The truth is I should have been far kinder, and yet I was not. I followed the lead of my son, and that is all there is to say about the affair."

"Is that really all there is to say?" Rose countered, folding her arms under her bosom. "About the ruination of a family because of your son's actions?"

"Your father had an agreement with my son, and he breached it, therefore, yes," the dowager said without apology. "Yes, I understand the crushing of people is so easy to do when a contract has been breached. It is the way of the world, and I think you understand the way of the world far better than you're letting on in this moment."

Rose grimaced. "Perhaps you're right, but I do not understand why you are here."

"I am here because I'm concerned."

"About me? I promise I'm doing very well."

"I can see you are doing well enough, though." The dowager looked about the small rooms. "This is not very up in the world of you, my dear. With your

face, surely you could do better.”

“Surely, I could,” she said, “but then I would be captured and the prisoner of a man, always at his beck and call.”

The dowager’s eyes narrowed. “And are you afraid to be at someone’s beck and call?”

“Yes, weren’t you?”

“Oh no,” the dowager said easily. “I began to understand my power quite early, of course, and wielded it well, and my husband encouraged it. Do you think Derby will do the same for you?”

She coughed. “What are you speaking of?”

“My grandson. You are going to marry him, are you not?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Lady Derby. I have never considered the idea of marrying your grandson.”

A laugh tumbled out of the dowager’s mouth. “You have. He is powerful, he is important, and you have been spending a great deal of time in his company, and no doubt, circumstances have arisen, which you’re aware of, and you shall have to marry.”

She snorted. “Now it is you who is being ridiculous. I do not know what fantasy you have concocted.”

Lady Derby pulled a piece of news sheet out from her reticule. “This is you, is it not?”

She stilled. “I beg your pardon?”

“This is you,” the dowager stated more forcefully.

She looked at the sketch, and it showed her and Derby dancing at the theater. It did not look anything like she did at this moment. But it was a good representation of how she looked in disguise. “How could you possibly think this was me?”

The dowager gave her a sympathetic look. “Oh, my girl, I knew your mother when she was in the height of her beauty. You look a great deal like her, almost a picture, actually. I am sorry that she...”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Rose said before tears could spring to her eyes. “It is the way of the world, as you said.”

His grandmother tensed. “Yes, the world does horrible things to women, but I can’t stand by and not find out what is transpiring. Do you love him? Or are you manipulating him?”

“I am not going to marry your grandson,” she said, certain it was the answer the dowager longed to hear. “I would never marry a man like him.”

The dowager's eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "A man like him? The daughter of a rake and scoundrel dares to judge my grandson? Why do you think you have the right to—"

"Are you not the mother of a rake and a scoundrel and the grandmother of a rake and a scoundrel?" Rose counted, refusing to be cowed. It was easy for people of wealth and privilege to look down on those who had fought for everything they had.

The dowager drew herself up. "I don't think you understand exactly what my grandson has done for you or your brother."

"What?"

"He didn't tell you?" The dowager gasped.

"He didn't tell me anything because he abandoned us. He left me. He was supposed to be my friend."

"Oh, dear girl, what a fool you are," the dowager said sadly. "My son tossed you all out, thinking you were a bunch of debauched artists and that he could not support such a family, but the moment my grandson became the earl, he paid for your brother to go to Oxford. And that little pension you have? The money that set up your independence, do you truly think that came from some relative dying? You believe in fairy tales? I did not think you would. You seemed far more sensible than that from the articles and pamphlets and books I've read of yours."

"You've read them?"

The dowager nodded. "I confess to have read every word you have written, finding a great deal of sense in it. In fact, I admire you. I think you to be one of the better intellects of the day, and I admire your ideas about how women should live in this world, but you are not the sort of person I would hope to marry my grandson. You do not belong to our world. You know very little of it, and you won't belong."

"I don't want to belong," Rose said.

"Then you will leave him alone," the dowager replied. "And let him go."

A chill stole down her spine, wrapping around her heart. "What do you mean, let him go?"

The dowager huffed out an impatient breath. "He is clearly besotted by you. I told him who he should marry and he..."

"What?" Rose said.

"He's caught in your web," the dowager drawled archly.

"Am I a spider, then?"

The dowager softened, her shoulders sagging. “Perhaps not a spider, but you have spun things very clearly. Did you ask him to take you to those places? Because I highly doubt he asked you to go there.”

“I did,” Rose admitted. “He was willing to help me, to show the world what rakes are really like, to show...”

The dowager gave her a knowing look. “Or was he willing to take you to protect you from the harm that might come to you?” She drew herself up. “It seems to me in this, my dear, you are the one who is confused, you are the one who is using him, that you are the one who is a liar, and that you have involved him in something he will not be able to extract himself from.” A look of pain crossed the older woman’s face. “When people find out that he has done this, they will not understand that it was you who set it all about.”

The dowager plucked at her own sleeve and looked away. “I like you,” she said. “You are clever, but I cannot let you hurt him. He has already been hurt enough.”

“We have all been hurt enough, Lady Derby,” Rose whispered.

“Then let it stop now,” the dowager snapped. “He saved you. Now save him back.”

She turned on her heel, strode from the room, and left Rose with a piece of paper in her hand and darkness in her heart, because the dowager was not mistaken.

Everything she had said had been the truth, and she’d been left with the realization that Derby was a liar, too. All this time, making her think he had abandoned her, when, in fact, her entire life was only possible because of him.

Chapter Twenty-One

The door opened before him, and before she could even say a word, he announced, “We have a problem.”

She stared up at him with a pale face, her eyes strangely watery. “You were not scheduled for a visit. This is the second unexpected arrival I’ve had from your family today.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Come in, then.” She gestured for him to join her, and he crossed her threshold. Uncertain now, he had come with purpose, though his heart had been pounding and he did not know how he was going to say what he needed to say.

Now that seemed impossible, for something had happened to her, just as it had happened to him this day. The odds of it seemed almost impossible, but he knew the vagaries of life and how sometimes the heavens seemed to line up to cause difficulty for a man. “What is it?” he asked carefully.

She winced and looked down. “Your grandmama, she visited me and warned me off you.”

“What?” Her words made no sense. Surely, his grandmother would not act thus. But then a sinking feeling hardened his gut. Perhaps she would if she thought she was protecting him.

“She has made it clear I should not marry you because I would be taking advantage of you.” She forced a brittle smile and met his gaze. “But do not fear, sir. I have no desire to marry you.”

He was silent for a moment, then replied, “Would it be so terrible?”

Her throat tightened. And the war that danced in her gaze tormented him. But worse still was when resolve took root in those orbs and she nodded. “I think it would.”

The surety of her words was like knives, though he doubted she wished to

cause him pain. “What if we *have* to?” he asked softly.

“Have to? Those are strong words, Alexander.” She squared her shoulders, clearly on the defensive after his grandmother’s visit. “I do not have to do anything. There is always a choice.”

“And if the choice is ruination?” he challenged, his voice rougher now.

“I told you already,” she rushed defiantly, “you cannot ruin me.”

“And what if everyone were to find out about your ruse?” He felt a wave of desperation as he realized she was drifting away from him, like a boat unmoored, taken by the sea.

“Are you going to tell?” she demanded skeptically. “For I will not. I do not think your grandmama will, though she figured out it was me in the sketch.”

“Then someone else might, too. Your disguise is good, but—”

“Perhaps someone knew my mother years ago. Perhaps it’s possible,” she said with a shrug. “I look so different in day-to-day life. I think only someone who knew her as closely as your grandmother did would guess, and even then they couldn’t prove it. Besides, it was research for my pamphlet. I do not need to have a pristine reputation as do the young ladies of the ton. My father made sure I was damaged. Little could damage me further. I am not concerned.”

He could feel her fighting to maintain her control. She was trying to maintain it. Maintain control over her life, her feelings. He took a step toward her. “That is not all.”

Doubt shadowed her gaze. “What else could there be?”

He ground his teeth, then admitted, “Your brother knows. I did not mean him to, but circumstances arose beyond my control.”

She shook her head with disbelief and scoffed. “Could you not keep the secret any longer? Is that it? Does your family need to tell everyone everything?”

“Listen to yourself,” he gritted. “You sound—”

“Hysterical?” she demanded. “My life is being turned upside down. Your grandmother has accused me of terrible things, and perhaps she’s not mistaken. As a matter of fact, I think she is right and the picture she has painted of me...” She swallowed. “It does not make me feel well. It does not make me feel good about myself.”

“And must we feel good about ourselves?” he said before he could think. For he had to make her see that marriage to him was a good option. Far better than to be even more tainted by the cruelty of society. But she did not seem to

see it that way. No, her independence was all, and he struggled to seize any thread that might make her see how much he longed to help her. “From everything you have said, I should not feel good about myself. I should be ashamed of myself every day.”

She flinched. “No, Alexander, I don’t.”

“You have made it clear you don’t wish to marry a man like me,” he said passionately. “Your brother has made it clear I am not worthy to marry someone like you. I promised him that...”

She stilled, her eyes widening with suspicion. “What did you promise him?”

He looked away, realizing he had gone too far. Realizing that instead of helping his cause he had just worsened it.

“Tell me now,” she stated. “You can’t say such a thing and then leave it.”

“You said I abandoned you,” he whispered.

A look of regret crossed her face, and her eyes shimmered. “I know you did not.”

“He told you, then?” He was shocked Digby had been so bold as to confess about the arrangement they had made at Oxford.

“Told me what?” she asked before she shook her head. “Did he even know?”

Confused, he bit out, “Of course he knew. He made me promise.”

She drew in a shuddering breath. “Tell me exactly what you said to him, Alexander.”

“All those years ago,” he began, “when we were at Oxford, you were writing me, and I wanted to write back. I wanted to be your friend, but he made me promise to leave you, to never have connection with you because of who I am.”

“Because you’re a rake,” she said softly. “And you agreed?”

“Of course I did,” he returned, the memory of it charging through him, tensing his body. Wracking him with pain and regret and longing. “He’s my best friend, and I didn’t want to hurt you.”

She stood still for several agonizing moments before a sheen filled her eyes. Licking her lips, she looked away. But then...then she whipped her gaze back to his, hard and riveting.

“Did you not think it might hurt me to lose your friendship? I had already lost everything else. We were close. I trusted you and cared about you. You were a guide for me. I told you so many things.” Her face twisted with the

memories of her pain. "And then you took it all away."

"I promised him." Agony crashed through him. "I made a vow."

She wiped the tears from her eyes and steeled herself, her shoulders tensing and her arms crossing over her chest. "Yes, I see how it was. The men making decisions for the foolish lady. For men cannot trust ladies to their own judgment, weak creatures that they are. That is what you and my brother were doing to me. *Are* doing to me."

"No, I don't mean to do that," he protested, horrified, wishing he could pull her into his arms and make her see what he truly wished. But he couldn't. It was clear from her rigid posture his touch was the very last thing she wanted.

"But you did it," she rasped. "You're a liar, Alexander. A well-intentioned liar. You lie to everyone."

He pulled back. "What do you mean?"

"You lied to me," she whispered. "You didn't tell me about this vow. You kept me from it because you must not have thought I could understand it. You lied to my brother just as I asked you to do, and you lied to yourself."

"In what way do I lie to myself in your eyes?" he demanded, half afraid of what she might say, that it would rip him asunder. Still, he needed to hear it.

"A rake. That's what you aim to be, no?" She let out a mirthless laugh before folding her arms. "What are you running from with all this pleasure and this distraction? What are you trying to avoid? What dark secret is inside you? For you are lying to yourself if you think it's just because you enjoy pleasure. It's to hide your pain."

He narrowed his eyes. "Cease."

"Cease what?" Her eyes widened as if something had dawned upon her. "I think I know what it is. You don't want anyone to see you. You want everyone to think you're some carefree fellow who's never experienced an ounce of pain, who doesn't know suffering. But the truth is you are terrified. You're terrified that you could be like your father, cruel like him, unkind like him, or even like my father, and so you must laugh at everything."

"That is unfair," he ground out. "Carefree? Yes, because I think life is beautiful. *You* cannot see the beauty in life. You choose to ignore all of it. You instead only see pain and sin and suffering because your father made terrible decisions. You can't see all the good I have done, how I helped you. Over and over. And so many others."

"Helped me?" she echoed. "With money? Thank you, but I longed for your friendship, and you abandoned me."

“I was with you every step.”

Her eyes rounded. “Please don’t lie about this.”

“I took care to know all about you and how you could be helped,” he rushed. “Because I wanted you to be safe. I watched over you.”

Her shoulders sagged. “All this time? But you could not come and see me or sit with me.”

“I promised,” he said, his voice barely audible.

“You made me feel so alone.” Her breath hitched. “Oh, Alexander, you wasted so many years. We could have been friends. I could have had someone.” She dashed her hand over her face then, and a wave of dread crashed through him. For in that instant, it felt as if she was cutting him loose.

“You think I am unworthy,” he said flatly. “You *always* have. Don’t try to change that now. You’ve not seen the good in me in years. No matter how I tried.”

She stilled as if he had slapped her. The room rang with the silence, and he felt like he could not breathe. She stared at him with shock. “I’m sorry if that’s how you feel, but why should I see that when you have kept so much from me?” she said softly, mercilessly. “When you have lied to everyone about so much?”

“And you?” he pointed out, feeling like he was rattling down a path he could not pull back from, careening toward the edge. “You don’t lie to anyone? You lie to your brother all the time. You lie to yourself, too.”

Her mouth dropped open with indignation. “I do not.”

“Yes, you do,” he finally said, no longer willing to hold back. “Because within you is a deep well of emotion, the power of it charging through you. You could help so many people with your poetry. You could speak to thousands with the beauty of it to show them that they’re not alone in their suffering, but you will not do it. You will keep it to yourself because you are afraid, afraid of losing control, which is why we had to have the agreement to end our union. You had to be certain we would go our separate ways, because the truth is you know deep in your heart that you are full of emotion and that what is between us is special. That it means something. And you are terrified of losing control, just like your father.”

Her eyes narrowed, and her body went rigid. But instead of a fiery reply, she grew cold, hard. “No,” she said, gesturing to the space between them. “*This* was nothing. This was an arrangement. I never should have asked you.”

“Perhaps you shouldn’t.” His body shook with emotion, realizing he was about to lose her. “For I always wanted more, but I stayed away because I didn’t want to hurt you any more than my father had hurt your family. I still remember that night.”

“Is that why you did it?” she asked flatly, as if all her hopes had been dashed.

“Did what?” he asked, stunned by the sudden question.

Dark emotions danced through her gaze then. “Paid for my brother’s education, paid for my life. Everything I thought I built on my own. It was a lie. It was because of you. You did all of that.”

He couldn’t reply because he couldn’t deny it. “I gave you a foundation to stand on because my father ripped it out from underneath you, but you did the rest.”

She looked away from him. “I am grateful to you for helping me and my brother. I would be the worst sort not to be. But we must admit it. We are both liars. We have deceived each other. How could we ever trust each other again?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he began as fear washed through him. She was drifting away, heading toward the horizon, soon to be lost. “Please—”

She gave him a grim look. “You should marry Lady Penelope. She’s the one for you, the one your grandmother wants. The dowager is right. I won’t fit in your world. I don’t *want* to fit in your world. I thought perhaps...” A tear slipped down her cheek, and she dashed it away, clearly furious with herself that the tear had fallen at all.

“What?” he asked, certain that if she could but say it all would be well.

“Nothing.” She whirled away from him and said, “Please go.”

“I don’t want to go,” he said, his voice rough with emotion. “I want to stay with you.”

She turned to the window and shook her head. “It is over. It is done. The research for the pamphlet is finished.”

He felt disoriented, desperate. This couldn’t be how it ended. It couldn’t. She’d come back into his life after all these years. For what? A brutal ending? “Surely, there is more for you to observe.”

She let out a pained sigh, her body curving with defeat. “Is there? Have you been hiding things from me? Or are you trying to expose me further? And then I’d have to marry you so you do not feel so guilty about having an amour with your best friend’s sister?” She squared her chin. “I would not

marry you, to be clear. I'd never marry to avoid a scandal, for I have already known scandal. Do you think I would condemn myself to a marriage like that? After my parents?"

He grimaced. "Is that what you think I'm about? Tricking you to make your life miserable? All I have done my entire life was try to right the wrongs done in the past."

"Well, you can't," she said flatly. "Just as it seems I can't. My father died. My mother died. All of it was taken away, and I have seen—"

"You have seen suffering," he said. "And you cling to it, Rose. Your thorns...they are the part I love best, but you are also refusing to bloom. You won't let it go. You can't see that there is happiness and joy and that we could—"

"Are you going to stop being a rake?" she demanded harshly. "Would you give it all up for this love you say you've always felt? That you so easily hid and denied? You'll choose me? That's what my mother thought with my charming father, and I will never fall into the same trap. Go."

He wanted to cross the room and drag her into his arms and keep her there until she felt his love. But that would never work with such a spirit as Rose.

"My brother was right," she bit out. She steeled herself as if she was about to do something. Something on purpose. Something she could not take back. "When you made that vow, you were right, too. For I could never choose a man like you. Never."

Those harsh words hanging in the air were horrifying, as if she had plunged a dagger in his heart. Her face was a mask of pain and determination. And he knew there was nothing left to say. Alexander charged out of the room then, unwilling to hear more. He could have sworn that he heard something slam against the wall, and he stopped for a moment, but he did not look back. He had been looking back far too long, wishing for something that could never be, because she would always see him as not enough.

She would always see him as just a rake, even though that wasn't who he was. For years, he had striven to show he was so much more. That he cared for others, protected them, gave them strength and power. But she could not see that. Could she ever? Or would he, like Sisyphus, spend the rest of his life trying?

She'd never marry him. Not even for scandal. He'd been a fool to think she could be his.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Alexander longed to break things, to hurl vases, to throw chairs, to grab the decanter of brandy and drink it to its dregs. But he wouldn't do any of those things. He was not going to throw himself into the abyss in which Rose had been so certain he would plunge. In her mind, the fate of all rakes.

As he stood in the center of his study, he did not know which way to turn. It was the first time in many years that he had felt thus. While he was not some paragon of virtue who spent every waking moment of his life in the pursuit of some activity, he did believe in the importance of rest and of luxuriating in the beauties of this life; however, he could not decide how to cope with this.

Perhaps he should head straight out to Lady Penelope's house and propose marriage as it seemed everyone thought he should do. That would solve it, he would have a decision made, but it burned through him like bitter poison. He dug his nails into his palms and let out a roar. It tore from his throat, his whole body shaking with the rage at the injustice of it all. And when the last note slipped past his lips, he did not feel better. He felt hollow, so bloody hollow that he had spent his life desperately hoping that she would wake up to him, that she would see him, but she never was going to because she could not even see herself.

"You've loved her for a long time, haven't you?" He whipped around at that voice.

Harry stood in the open doorway of his study, his face ashen, his shoulders thrown back with a certain defiance. But he did not look like a man who'd come to do murder.

Even so, Alexander threw his arms open and declared, "Here, shall we go out to the fields, pistols or swords?"

"Neither," Harry said, exhausted. "I've come to apologize."

“Apologize?” Alexander lowered his arms. Disbelief and confusion snuck through him. “For what? You’ve never done anything wrong in your entire life.”

“I wish that was true,” Harry said. He shook his head. “But you have proven to me that I am as fallible as any man and worse.”

Harry’s brow furrowed as he lamented, “Good God. How could you let me think those things about you?”

Alexander shrugged. “Everyone seems to think those things about me. Everyone I love, at any rate.” He crossed to his desk, throwing open his appointment book, trying to decide what he could do to fill his time to avoid the feelings rattling through him. “I don’t want to do this right now, Harry.”

“What?” Digby said.

He looked down at the pages but could not focus. “This confession. I realize you are a vicar, and you wish to have your sins out, but as far as I can tell, the sharing of emotions helps nothing.”

Harry strode toward him, crossed around the desk, and grabbed him by the shoulders. “Look at me. I thought you a foolish, fun fellow who did not think of anything serious. Not even your art. I didn’t value what you did. I couldn’t see or understand what you were about, but even when you were barely a man, Alexander, you were more responsible than your father ever was. You saved my life, no doubt, and my sister’s. But you let us believe—”

“What?” Alexander challenged, dragging his gaze up to his friend’s.

Harry sighed sadly. “You let us believe what we saw.”

“You could have asked more about me. You could have given me some benefit of the doubt. We were friends for years.”

“Yes, but everything that I saw,” Harry insisted, his eyes flashing with pain.

Alexander nodded. “You’re right. I acted the rake. But the truth is there’s always been more to me. I didn’t want to have to defend myself to you, to prove that I was a...”

“A good person?” Harry cut in. “Unlike your father?”

He gave a tight nod.

Harry squeezed his arms and hauled him toward him. “You were the brother I never had, and I didn’t see how good you were. My entire life is possible because of you. Without you, who knows what would’ve happened to me?” he said. “Who knows what would’ve happened to Rose? You saved us from so many things.”

Alexander had never wanted gratitude, just acceptance, and now that he was getting it from Harry, he wasn't quite certain what to do. "It seems I may have cast myself out of the running trying to do the right thing. She doesn't want me. She never will."

"She's stubborn," Harry said softly. "Don't give up trying."

"I'm done trying," Alexander bit out. "A man can only try so many times. She firmly believes I am no more than—"

"But that's because—"

"No," Alexander growled. "I've given her opportunities to see the depth inside me. It's not about me anymore. She is caught in the past."

Harry winced. "If you had seen what happened to our father, Alexander, the way he died, the horror of it. She visited him every day in that asylum, did you know?"

"I didn't know," Alexander whispered.

Harry's face twisted with emotion. "It was terrible for her. She couldn't abandon her duty to him, even though she should have. And it broke her day by day seeing him descend and... Our mother, good God, she could not take it. They say you can't die of a broken heart, but I don't believe it. Our mother did. And while I was away at school, who do you think held her hand?"

Alexander swallowed back waves of sorrow for the woman he loved who had borne so much suffering. Who had to be strong for others and had never recovered from it.

"Who got her through every day?" Harry continued. "Who dressed her, who washed her, who fed her when she did not wish to get out of bed? Living in that small apartment that was so different than the house our mother had been accustomed to?" His eyes flashed with a mixture of anger for the past and admiration for his sister. "It was Rose."

"I wish she could be happy," Alexander rasped. "I wish she'd let me make her happy."

"No one can make anyone happy," Harry said. "But you deserve love and you deserve my apology, for you are a great and good man. You help so many people. You must help yourself now. Let the world see how good you are. You don't need to hide it."

Alexander looked away. "I never thought I was hiding it. I was just being myself. I wish..."

"Yes," Harry prompted.

"I wish I hadn't kept it from her, though, all those years ago, and I wish I'd

never made that vow to you because she was always...”

“The one,” Harry said.

He gave a tight nod. “She was, yes.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said. “I’m sorry I was so foolish and did that to you both.”

A sound caught his ear, and he glimpsed to the doorway, and for a single second he could have sworn he saw the rustle of skirts, his grandmother’s skirts. And then her footsteps strode firmly down the hall, away from him.

His heart sank. He had a duty that he had to do.

Everyone told him he should do it, even the woman that he loved, but he wasn’t going to marry Lady Penelope. He wasn’t about to make another woman miserable. No. He would find another way to do his duty, and he wasn’t about to give up everything that he’d ever believed in just because other people thought that he wasn’t good enough.

It was time that he started believing he was good enough. Just as James had said, just as Harry was saying now. He had to believe it. He was enough.

Even if he was alone.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The tears kept falling. They spilled hot out of her eyes, tumbling to her desk and the parchment scattered over the cherry wood. Her tears mingled with the ink.

She had driven him away on purpose. Her cruelty had almost stolen her breath away. But she'd had to make him leave her, just as his grandmother had hoped she would. She kept trying to stop them, but now it was as if a river had flooded out of her body. All these years, holding the tears back, forcing them behind the walls of her discipline, her duty and all that she had striven for since her father and mother's death.

The pamphlet lay on the table. It was finished. But now the emotions would not stop pouring out of her. She picked up her quill, pulled a piece of paper to her, and began to write quickly, the poem pouring out of her. She did not even need to rewrite a single word, a single line. And when she reached the end of it, she threw the quill down, ink splattering, and buried her face in her hands.

Her shoulders shook with the power of her sobs. What had she done? What was she doing? She did not know how to surrender to possibility, for all she could see was the pain awaiting her in a marriage with a man like Alexander. A man too handsome, too charming, too in love with life. Oh, she loved him, but it was that very love, the depth of it, the power of it that terrified her. She could not allow herself to be vulnerable. She simply...

"My dear, the door was left open a crack. Do forgive me."

Rose swung her gaze up and spotted the Dowager Countess of Derby lingering in the shadows.

She wiped at her eyes. "Please go away," she said.

The older woman gave a rueful shake of her head. "Unfortunately, I can't because I am here on a most important mission."

She blew out a harsh breath. “If you are here to tell me to stay away from him, I have already told him to go, that I will not marry him.”

The countess strode in with characteristic self-possession. “I can see why you would think that is why I’m here.”

And then much to her shock, the dowager countess knelt by the desk, at Rose’s feet. It couldn’t have been an easy feat given the woman’s years. She took Rose’s hand in her wrinkled, beringed ones.

“I’m an old woman,” the dowager began, her voice rich with emotion. “I have been on this earth now for some time, and I have seen the vagaries of life, the cruelty of people, the mistakes that are made every day in hope of doing well.” She sighed. “The intentions that turn out badly. And my dear, I find that in this last part of my life that I can no longer stand rigid in tradition and duty.”

The dowager lowered her silvered head as if she was gathering herself to face something she found difficult. “My son was rigid in tradition and duty. He did everything that he was supposed to, though his life was one of a rake, as you said. My daughter-in-law also did what duty demanded. She lived a quiet life as a wife, doing exactly as she was supposed to, bearing an heir. And I, well, I was luckier than most. My husband wished me to be bold, and I was, and yet I was still everything I was supposed to be. You are *nothing* a countess is supposed to be.”

A hot wave of sorrow and anger crashed through her. “Please, I have already—”

The dowager squeezed her hand and declared loudly, “And yet my grandson loves you. And so I must love you, too.”

The dowager lifted her gaze to Rose’s, and in those orbs, compassion and kindness waited. For the first time in Rose’s life, she wanted to throw herself into someone’s arms and to take comfort there. She’d never been able to do so with her father, with her mother, but with the dowager countess there, wrapping her hand around hers, saying these things, she longed to be like a small child again and to be comforted.

But, instead, sorrow running through her, she lamented, “Love is not enough.”

“No,” the dowager agreed forcefully. “You are right. Love is not enough. There must be *more*. But, my dear, what you are doing is not right, either. Hiding yourself, protecting yourself, keeping yourself from love, that will result in suffering, too. And when you get to be my age, you will look back at

the long years of your life and regret this choice. And there is an agony to regret that I can't even explain to you. Please do not take that path."

Rose's heart ached with the force of her dismay. She licked her lips and tried to make sense of it all. "Now, you wish me to marry him? You have turned so quickly in your wishes and beliefs?"

"I have," the dowager said simply, easily, full of acceptance. "Because he loves you. I understand it now. He's always loved you beyond anything, and I cannot cause him to suffer as I have seen so many suffer. Perhaps if we chose to be true to ourselves, there would be so much less suffering in this life."

"I have seen what happens," Rose countered fiercely, "when people choose indulgence over duty."

"I am not talking about indulgence," the dowager said. "I am talking about choosing love, real love, not a fleeting amour. But standing by another person, helping them grow, and truly loving them for all that they are."

"I am afraid," Rose whispered.

"I know," the dowager replied gently. "But you have never been a coward, Rose. Not until now."

She gasped at the shocking statement. "Please, please. All I have is my strength and what I've clung to."

"It is not making you stronger," the dowager insisted. "It'll make you weaker through the years, and one day, you will wake up alone and *still* afraid. So choose now to be bold, as you have in everything else. I cannot force you to it, but I would hate to see the two of you suffer for the rest of your lives simply because you were afraid of something that *might* happen."

The dowager then did the unthinkable. She leaned forward and embraced Rose, swallowing her up in silk and lavender perfume. "You understand it's not reality, my darling. You are simply imagining the possibility of pain, and you're terrified at what could occur. But imagine if it all worked out well. You will be by the side of the man you love, who I think you've always loved, just as he has always loved you."

The dowager hugged her a trifle tighter and carefully stood. She touched Rose's cheek, then turned quietly and strode from the room, leaving Rose contemplating the possibilities of fear and hope. As Rose returned her gaze to her own poem, she did not know if she was brave enough to take the risk.

...

Rose poured over page after page of the poetry that she had written, of the poetry that Alexander had read to her that night long ago, and her heart bled.

Her eyes searched over the final poem, the one she had written before the dowager's arrival. Desperate for answers, desperate for a way to end her pain.

She had done everything she vowed she would not do. She sat in her dressing gown at the table and lifted her gaze to the window. Her hair tumbled down over her shoulders. She had not brushed it this morning. She had not braided it.

No. It was all that she could do to look at the poetry, the words that she had spilled onto the pages where she had poured out her soul and her heart. Alexander had encouraged her to share it with the world, and she had allowed him to do it. But now, she wondered, was it the greatest mistake? His grandmother had come to her, urging her, begging her to give in to love for her grandson, and she understood the protestation. But here in this moment with her emotions flooding through her, staring up at the window at her own table, barely able to eat, unwilling to have even a slice of toast, the ghost of her mother was with her, aching and full of longing for her father who had died, who had abandoned them to his nature.

Could she forget all of that? Could she forget her own vows to never marry a rake? To never fall in love with one? She was certain she had already broken one of those vows, and there was no going back from that. She didn't have to break the other. She could still resist. She could still cling to her strength, the strength that had gotten her through the years.

But was he just a rake? No. He was so much more. And her own narrow thinking had tried to pigeonhole him as one kind of person when all along he had been doing everything in his power to make her life better. Could she cast all of him aside because she was so afraid of one part of him?

The firm knock on the door jolted her. She ignored it. Instead of answering, she let her fingers trace over the letters on the parchment. She had already had more than enough visitors since her heartbreak. She did not need another, but the knock persisted. She remained silent and gritted her teeth.

"Rose, open up. It is your brother."

She winced. Harry would not go away easily, and she needed to question him. It soared up in her like a wave, a wave of anger and bitterness.

So she stood, feeling like an old woman, older than she had ever been. Her soul railed at her fate as she crossed and pulled open the door. She stared at her beloved brother. And then all her anger and fury melted away, for Harry's

face, his dear, dear face, was one of fear and contrition and love. It was impossible to hate him conspiring with Alexander, when she knew that he was just trying to protect her, protect her as he could. When there had been no one to protect her. Or him.

“May I come in?” he said, his voice low and rough. His entire appearance was haggard.

She gestured in. “Have you come to convince me of something? For—”

“I have not come to convince you of anything, Rose,” he said gently as he walked in.

She shut the door behind him, wondering what he could possibly have to say. He strode to the table and stared down at the paper scattered there.

“Don’t,” she rushed, but his fingertips trailed over the pages.

“You wrote these?” he whispered.

“Yes,” she confessed, folding her arms across the front of her dressing gown.

“I did not know you wrote such beautiful poetry.”

She bit her lower lip. “No one did.”

“Except him.”

She nodded. “Yes, he saw them, and he wouldn’t let me escape them. He made me turn and face those words I had written, and he asked me to share them with the world.”

“Did you?” Harry asked, his eyes wide with astonishment.

“Once,” she said, “but I do not know if I can bear to face it again. To do it again.”

“You must, Rose,” he said, his voice full of hope. “You must be done with hiding.”

“I am not hiding,” she bit out.

A muscle in his jaw tightened. “You are, and I am guilty of helping you to do it.”

“I beg your pardon?”

He shook his head, and his brow furrowed. “I told Alexander to stay away from you when we were at Oxford all those years ago because I saw him going out repeatedly with his friends and making merry and doing what so many of the other young men did then. He was a rake. Just like our father had started out. But unlike Papa, Alexander was never cruel, and he always...”

Harry’s voice died off.

“He always what?” she whispered.

The muscles of his throat worked beneath his pressed cravat before he rushed out, “I think he always loved you, Rose. He always wanted you, even then. Do you know what he said to me on the day I told him to stay away from you?”

“What?” she asked, her hands tightening into fists, as if she could prepare herself for anything.

Harry looked to the window as if he was ashamed of himself. “That he could marry you.”

“What?”

Harry swung his gaze back to her, his eyes a storm. “Even then, all those years ago, he said, ‘I could marry Rose.’ And I thought he was jesting. But I know now to the very core of my being that you were what he wanted, but he didn’t know how to say it. He was afraid then. Afraid of what I’d say. And what did I tell him? To stay away from you. I made him feel unworthy.”

“So did I,” she returned, her eyes burning, and then the emotion, like a great current, began to well up inside her.

Harry strode to her and took her hands in his. “All that time, he was the one, the only one who saw the goodness in us when the rest of the world wanted to cast us aside like we were nothing. He pulled us up out of hell and gave us a chance. And what did we do? We acted superior, as if he was the one who was low. It was the world, Rose, that was low, not him.”

Tears began to slip through her lids and trace down her cheeks. She could no longer hold them back. “It hurts,” she said.

“Of course it hurts,” he said. “A lifetime of sorrow is shoring up in you now, but allow it to come, Rose, because if you do, you’ll be free. Free to have love, free to have him.”

“But what if...” she said, her voice breaking.

“Oh, Rose, what if it is all wonderful?”

“I don’t know if I can believe it,” she protested, holding tight to her brother.

And then he pulled her into his arms. “You must,” he said. “You are doing exactly what Mama did all those years ago.”

“That’s not true,” she countered.

“Yes, it is, Rose. If you keep hiding, you will be giving up on life, like she did. You’ll be acting as if there’s nothing worth living for. Do not give in now.”

The dowager’s warning of regret at the end of her life echoed in Rose’s

mind.

“Did you talk to the dowager today?” She laughed, slipping back and dashing the tears from her eyes.

“No,” he said, his hands still on her upper arms. “But if she said something similar, she is right. We must come out of the shadows, Rose. I beg your forgiveness for trying to control your life.”

“You were trying to protect me,” she said quickly.

“Yes, and I nearly ruined your life.” Harry’s gaze grew most serious as he said, “You love each other. Do not throw that away.”

“But what if love...is not enough?”

“What if with him, love is enough? More than enough?”

This time, she felt her whole heart crack open. And for one moment, she glimpsed the possibility of what if love was enough. Because she was not in the past now. All that was before her was the future. And she could choose if she was to be alone or with the man who loved her, who had always loved her, and who wanted to love her forever.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Alexander stood outside the club where it had all begun, lingering on the pavement as coaches navigated their way through the traffic along the exclusive street. Lanterns flickered, illuminating the doorway. He wanted to go home.

He wanted to bury himself in his bed, but he wasn't going to do that. Oh, no. He was going to force himself to go step by step and live his life and do the things that he needed to do. It didn't matter if he was falling through a chasm of pain and suffering without her. He crossed up the steps, passed the majordomo, and headed into the beautifully appointed foyer.

Evelyn Turnbridge was holding her literary evening as she did every week, and he wasn't going to miss it. Even if the very idea of attending the place where he had read her poem aloud felt like he was being ripped apart.

He headed into the crowded salon. It was packed this evening, and Evelyn Turnbridge, like the fixture that she was, was at the center of it all. Her beautiful green silk gown glimmered like an emerald. Her blonde hair was piled atop her head, and her eyes danced with perfection. She glanced over at him and inclined her head. He went to the back of the room and paused by the teal silk-covered wall. He needed to speak to a few writers tonight and assure them more funds would find their way into their accounts.

He would find them later in the crush. Tonight, he did not feel capable of witty conversation, but his presence was important. His presence gave people hope that they would find someone who would support them and make it financially possible for them to be writers and not clerks who wrote in their spare time. Or worse, starved in garrets with no firewood and barely enough coin for paper or ink.

Perhaps tonight he would hear a new voice, someone that Evelyn thought was worthy, and he would help them. Because that's what he was going to do

now for the rest of his life. He was going to help people so they did not have to feel the suffering of life. It was enough. It was more than enough. He was going to help as many as he could so that they did not feel abandoned as Rose had felt abandoned, as she had been forced to face the world with so much upon her shoulders.

His throat closed. He forced himself to swallow. He bloody well was not going to go to pieces here. Alexander folded his arms across his chest and dug his fingertips into his biceps. Evelyn Turnbridge headed toward the front of the salon and clapped her hands.

“Good evening, literary lovers!” she called, and the moment her crystal voice cut through the air, the gentlemen in the room fell silent, as did the other mistresses and courtesans. “It is time for the evening to begin, and we have a true star that will shine brightly in the firmament. Tonight, we are truly gifted, for this is the first time she will read to us. You had a taste of her work not long ago, read out loud by the Earl of Derby, but tonight the writer herself shall proclaim it to you all.” Evelyn paused, her eyes dancing. “She has made a special request that she be able to do so, for her message, she said, is unique.”

Derby tensed. It wasn't possible, was it? It couldn't be. He glanced to Evelyn, and Evelyn inclined her head again ever so slightly. And then the courtesan gestured to the door at the back of the salon. In strode Rose, not dressed as his courtesan, not in translucent silk with her hair curled softly about her head with jewels sparkling upon her. No, she wore a simple dove gray gown, her dark hair curled gently at the nape of her neck. Her eyes shone brightly, and she did not need a single jewel to sparkle, to make her shine.

But, somehow, she did not seem as bound up as she had before in her simple gown. As she crossed into the room, there was a murmur of astonishment, for they all understood in that moment that she had been the one masquerading as his courtesan. Those who had seen her before.

It was quite a stir for a long moment because she had been in their midst in disguise. There was a hint of suspicion and unease, and she stood before them and lifted her chin and declared, “I came here to observe you all, to judge you,” she said.

There was a murmur of protest.

“You see, I was raised with the effects and consequences of having a rake for a father. And I, like Aphra Behn, have been convinced that all rakes

relapse into the behavior that they have always known.” She paused, her eyes searching over the crowd. “I was ready to be cruel. I was ready to be certain that change is not possible. That a man that I love dearly could only ever be a rake. Though the entire point of why I came to observe you all was to help rakes change.”

She shook her head, as if realizing the madness of her own folly. “But I see now that I am the one who needs to change. You see, I can insist and protest that rakes need to be different, but I understand that sometimes a rake is simply a rake who loves the world and enjoys beauty. And sometimes a rake is someone who has had much suffering and is trying to alleviate that. But I cannot change you all, nor should I try, for we are each on a journey attempting to end the suffering in our hearts.”

The audience listened, rapt, the gentlemen and mistresses all hanging on her every word as they waited to see where this was headed.

“And before I try to change anything or anyone,” she proclaimed, “I must mend my own heart. We are each beautiful in this room, though many of us ache and try to mend that ache with all sorts of things. Yet, in this room, I see hope and promise.” She lifted her chin, her eyes shining. “Here in these rooms where rakes and courtesans do roam, there is the beauty of words, of poetry, of music, of worlds imagined. And that is where the pain becomes hope. I see all those, such as the Earl of Derby, who would lift people from their suffering with helping hands rather than judgment.”

Tears shimmered in her eyes then, and a single one slipped down her cheek. “I have hurt myself so much, but I don’t wish to do that any longer.” She cleared her throat. “My heart, my heart,” she began, her voice shaking. “I have locked it up in bitter prisons, forcing it to drink gall. I have made it swallow rivers of pain whilst love danced on the edges, waiting to be seen. I have shoved that love in darkest places, telling it to go, be quiet and not tempt me into pain. But pain is a room that I have dwelt in and wrapped up my heart in its cloak. But love was ever patient, and love stood waiting certain that I would choose it over pain. Alas, alas the day, I chose pain, for it was a familiar friend. Love slipped away then in sadness’s embrace, broken-hearted that I should abandon it.

“As pain tried to wrap me up and drag me down in its dark dregs, I saw that love would always be the way, that love would always turn and offer me its hand. And so I pried myself from pain, and now I offer my hand to love, to that love, which was always waiting, which always saw that I was worthy.

And I beg of it now to take me by the hand. For I shall drop my sorrow like the cloak of night and abandon pain for the light of day, the light of love.”

There was a long pause as she finished, tears streaming down her face, and her gaze locked with Derby’s and then applause.

Much to Derby’s shock, tears stained the cheeks of many a gentleman, as if the ghosts of greater poets had filled the room from a time when emotion was supposed to be the ruler of the day. Derby stepped forward and began to applaud. And others soon stood and joined him, a thundering sound as they all had known the oppression of pain, the cruelty of it, and how it tried to tear love away.

She crossed the room to him then, weaving her way through the gentlemen, and held out her hand. “My love,” she said, her eyes dancing with hope, “I would not have married you if there had been a scandal. Even if that makes me foolish to most of the world, I could not marry to save our reputations. But for love? Real love?” She drew in a long breath and lifted her hand a little higher, waiting for him to take it. “Will you marry me?”

“A man like me? You will love me?” he rasped.

“Always,” she said. “I have always loved you, but fear stopped me, and I will no longer be afraid.”

And instead of taking her hand, he wrapped her in his arms and pulled her close, ready to embrace love and the light of day. “Yes, my love. I will marry you. I always wanted to. I always will.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

The news sheets were positively agog that the writer, Miss Rose Digby, was marrying the Earl of Derby. After all, the class distinction between them was large.

Miss Derby was known for her criticism of society, the upper classes, and the unjustness of it all. The Earl of Derby was a man about town, a rake, a fellow who loved a good time. And the pairing seemed quite odd. Surely, they would be oil and vinegar. Ice and heat. Water and fire.

But it seemed that society and the people of England thought the match to be one of fairy tales!

And the mix of two opposites to create something more beautiful, more perfect, and more glorious than anyone could have ever considered was beloved by all those who read or heard of it.

In fact, there were sketches everywhere of them together, her in her simple gown and him in his grand clothes, and everyone seemed both astounded and in awe of such a match. After all, everyone loved a wedding, didn't they? Especially one that was so surprising. Perhaps there were a few grumbles in the ton, but the ton did love a good grumble. So even in that there was joy, and the Dowager Countess of Derby had nipped it all in the bud by taking her soon-to-be granddaughter out for public display at several functions. The dowager had, in great fanfare, proclaimed how clever, marvelous, and splendid the future Countess of Derby was.

And if anyone wished to cause trouble with Rose, they would have to go through the formidable barbs of the dowager's tongue, and no one wished such a thing upon themselves.

So after the wedding at St. Paul's where she and Alexander had been greeted by a crowd outside the steps when they had exited, the coach traveled through the crowded streets of London. They went slowly, allowing

themselves to be seen by the well-wishers who waved ribbons and flowers that had been passed out amongst the city so that all could cheer with great joy.

Rose stared out the windows of the coach, thinking back to but a few weeks ago, to a different time when she had thrown herself into Derby's coach and asked for his help. And then she had thrown herself out again, determined to write her pamphlet. She would not be throwing herself anywhere. No, she would not be running off again. She was here with him.

And when the coach pulled up before his London house, she gasped. It was so easy to forget the vast wealth that he had, the ancient line he came from, but as he helped her down to the steps and guided her in through the towering Doric columns to the house that dominated the street, she could not escape her new destiny and how marvelous it was. For full of promise and hope, she gazed up at her husband. As they entered in through the foyer, there was a thundering of applause from the guests who had been invited for the wedding breakfast.

Her brother, who had in grand fashion wed them at St. Paul's Church, stood first, his face one of joy. Typically, a cardinal or a bishop or an archbishop would have wed them, but they had both agreed that Harry had been there at the beginning of it all and that, without him, they would likely not have been able to find the courage to choose each other.

And so, in the end, it was Harry who should unite them for all time. Harry beamed in his black day suit. As he came toward them, he held out his arms and embraced them both. "Look at the family we now have!" he exclaimed.

"It is as it always should have been," Alexander declared, "and it always will be."

She could not cease smiling, so full of gratitude that they were both so at ease now. They had all been running away from their demons for years, and she hoped that her brother could at last let go of his. It was no easy thing.

She sensed Harry was lonely, but if all went well, perhaps that could end. Perhaps now Harry could find love, too, just as she had done. Just as he had helped her to do.

The Duchess of Ashbridge and her husband, the duke, the American, lifted flutes of champagne to the Countess and Earl of Derby.

Lily grinned. "I knew the moment I saw you two that it would happen."

The Earl of Derby laughed. "Of course you did, Lily. Nothing can get past you."

Lily winked at him. "I'm glad you recognize my intelligence."

"Everyone does, darling," James said, his gaze warm with his love for his wife. "They'd be a fool not to. And from the moment you told me about it, I knew it, too. There was a look in your eyes, and nothing can argue with that."

Lily's eyes danced as she tilted her face up and offered it for James's kiss, and much to Rose's delight and surprise, James took his wife's lips in a passionate kiss. As their kiss parted, Lily gazed up at him with such love that now Rose truly understood all that urging Lily had done to embrace passion.

Friends of Lily, James, and Alexander, the Duke and Duchess of Montrose were also there.

The Duchess of Montrose rushed toward her, her fiery hair glinting in the morning light. "Oh, my dear, we have yet to meet. But thank you so much for inviting me to your wedding breakfast."

"How could I not?" Rose said. "You are such a dear friend of Lily's, and we both are great lovers of the written word, are we not?"

The duchess's face warmed. "I have long admired your pamphlets and all that you did for Lily. I must tell you," the duchess said, taking her hands in hers, "I have ordered several copies of your new poems to be prominently displayed in my book shop."

She gasped, honored and delighted. "Have you indeed?"

Sharpe's and Sons was the loveliest, warmest, and most inviting place in all of London. Elizabeth nodded, and the Duke of Montrose strolled forward.

"She has not been able to put your book of poetry down. It is most difficult to pull her away from it," he said, his voice a low rumble. "Anything that gives my wife such pleasure and such moving feelings of expression I give my support to. Welcome to our circle of friends, Countess."

Countess. It hardly seemed possible, but it was true. Rose smiled up at the duke. She had always admired him, his dedication to the people of England. "Thank you, Your Grace. Your support is noted and much appreciated."

He gave her a mischievous look. "Even though I'm a dastardly aristocrat?"

She winked. "I shall make a few exceptions!"

"Exceptions?" trilled the dowager as she swept in, holding her champagne glass high. Her gaze shone with triumph. "We shall start a trend! All these unusual marriages. I do sense a fashion!"

The dowager crossed to her and gazed at her with approval. "And what do you think now of all of this, my dear?"

What did she think? She swallowed. How did she give voice to her

feelings?

She gazed around at all the wonderful, kind people in the room who had come to celebrate her and Alexander. “We are all on a journey,” she began. “And some of us won’t find love. Some of us are alone and afraid. But then...some of us fortunate ones have friends who push us onto the right path even when we do not wish to go.” She gazed up at her husband, who was looking on her now with such love. Her eyes filled with tears. But not tears of sorrow. Oh no. Tears of joy. “And if we are truly lucky,” she continued, “we let our feet take to that path and we go down it boldly and find a journey to our hearts and the destination that was always waiting for us.”

“And what was that destination?” Alexander asked her, softly circling his arms about her waist,

She tilted her head back and said without a second thought, “It was always us, my love. It was always us.”

Epilogue

Five years later

Rose had published the pamphlet on rakes some years ago, and it had been a success, likely because she had not come across as a self-righteous, virtuous know-it-all who wished to convert everyone to eating a diet of porridge and living as austere as a monk. No. She had called on society to do better by its young men, to provide them relief, kindness, support, opportunities to express themselves beyond violence, women, wine, and song.

Now, it had not caused an overnight change in society, but she liked to believe that some people had read it and that it had helped them to understand why some people threw themselves into pleasure so entirely that it became pain.

She had begun a foundation with the Earl of Derby to help families who had lost young men to such roads, where they could find support and kindness and understanding. It was the great work of her life, to help people like her mother. It was far more important than an article or a pamphlet lecturing people. And she'd only been able to do that with Derby and his vast supply of funds. Now, she sat at her desk, scribbling away. She had published two volumes of poetry with Derby supporting her every day and was working on a novel. And not a moral novel, no.

This one was her great work, one in which she was pouring out her heart and emotion in which a rake went down a path that he could not find himself out of and then found love. And he failed and failed until at last he could see he was worthy. The rake was not Derby, she realized. It was in many ways herself, for she had suffered and failed and failed.

But now she had seen how love was the way, not the absence of it. "Your hand looks as if it's about to cramp," Alexander said as he placed a cup of tea beside her. He insisted on bringing her tea and toast and not letting the maids

do it. He planted a kiss on the top of her head.

“Yes,” she said, “it is. How observant of you. You know me so well.” And it was true. He knew every part of her. She wondered if perhaps he always had. Rose thought of those long years of separation and how they had denied love for so long and what a wasteland it had been. But they had each needed to go along their paths to discover the joy that was waiting for them.

She leaned back in her chair, tilted her face up, and whispered, “Kiss me.”

He smiled down at her, cupped her face in his palms, and whispered against her mouth, “Always.” And he did. He kissed her then. He kissed her with a full favor of his love, as he did every day. There was no holding back. There was no pretense at being proper. Oh, no. Between them there were no walls, no lies, no denying the grand passion that had always been waiting for them.

She slid her hands up his arms and pulled him closer, knowing that love was the way, the path, the journey, the road. And she had been always on it, and she always would be because he was by her side.



The love doesn't end here...

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About the Author

USA Today bestselling author [Eva Devon](#) was raised on literary fiction, but quite accidentally and thankfully, she was introduced to romance one Christmas by Johanna Lindsey's Malory novella, *The Present*. A romance addict was born. She devoured every single Lindsey novel within a few months and moved on to contemporary and paranormal with gusto. Now, she loves to write her own roguish dukes, alpha males and the heroines who tame them. She loves to hear from her readers.

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