

THE  
SISTERHOOD OF  
INDEPENDENT  
LADIES

MAEVE  
GREYSON

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TO STEAL A

*Duke*

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**TO STEAL A DUKE**  
**The Sisterhood of Independent Ladies**  
**Book One**

by Maeve Greyson



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Text by Maeve Greyson

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Dragonblade Publishing, Inc. is an imprint of Kathryn Le Veque Novels, Inc.

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**aeve**

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## About the Author



# CHAPTER ONE

*Bening Manor*  
*East of Emden, Germany*  
*March 1815*

LADY CECELIA TUTTCLIFFE, Celia to a dearest few, ran her finger down a line of numbers for the third time, smearing them in the process. “For heaven’s sake, Celia, stop!” She slammed the ledger shut and shoved it into the corner of her desk. It was time to compose herself. Losing all sense of propriety simply would not do.

She eyed the long-handled bell waiting close at hand on its small silver salver. “Blast it all!” She snatched it up and shook it, half temper, half to lob it across the room.

Friedrich, the loyal footman who guarded them better than any governess, or highly trained mastiff, opened the library door before the jingling faded. “My lady?”

“He is still in there?”

The sandy-haired giant whom she felt sure was close to her age and twenty offered a sympathetic nod. “Yes, my lady. The physician with Her Grace.”

Celia was keenly aware that servants possessed a dangerously intimate knowledge of what went on in a manor. Keeping secrets from them was nearly impossible. Winning their loyalty and rewarding them for their silence was a much wiser course of action—especially for her and Mama. “But you have heard nothing through the door?”

Friedrich avoided her gaze and resettled his footing, squaring his shoulders as though bracing himself. Celia almost smiled. The footman always did that when he found a question uncomfortable. “Friedrich is well aware that Berta has the uncanny ability to hear a mouse squeal in the next province. What has she heard through that door?”

The man's shoulders slumped, and he stared at the floor. "Berta v  
tell me, my lady. She cannot speak for weeping."

Celia swallowed hard but failed to rid herself of the lump of er  
choking her. She cleared her throat and fought to maintain a calm e  
"Weeping?"

"Yes, my lady. I am sorry."

"Thank you, Friedrich. You may go." Celia pushed away from th  
and went to the window, blinking furiously against tears she refused t  
Mama would not die. Not yet. Not from this infuriating fatigue that  
these ridiculous doctors appeared able to diagnose or treat. Bloody  
The lot of them.

own the She fisted her hands against her middle and channeled her fears  
Oh, for determined rage. Mama would live. The inimitable Thea Tutcliffe, D  
it to the Duchess of Hasterton, was not but a few years past twoscore years of  
reason young widow by many accounts. She would live. Celia would c  
nothing less.

, round "My lady?" Friedrich quietly called from the doorway. "Her Gra  
pted to that you join her now."

Prepared to hear the same ineptness all the other physicians had s  
soldier, Celia exited the library, pausing only long enough to select the correct  
ore the her chatelaine and lock the door behind her. She had not secured the  
nor properly reviewed the most recent business correspondence on he  
While she didn't question the loyalties of most of the staff, she ne  
of three caution aside. "Friedrich, please let Mrs. Thacker know I have locl  
is still library. I shall let her know when she can open it for the maids to se  
tidying."

ntimate "Yes, my lady."

as next Celia hurried up the stairs, noting that Berta, her mother's lady's m  
ice was longer waited outside the double doors to Mama's suite. She pushed t  
Berta has them to find the elegant dowager duchess reclining on her favorite  
lounge in front of the sunny expanse of windows overlooking her gard

s broad The noted physician summoned from Austria stood at a nearb  
ootman rummaging through his black leather satchel. The man's wild gray  
h, I am knotted in a furious scowl. He glanced up when Celia entered and squ  
k in the her over the tops of his spectacles. "There is nothing to be done, m  
Your brother should consider returning to Emden." The doctor shrug

will not his stark black greatcoat, then spared a stern glance for Duchess Thea. "Your Grace should return sooner, rather than later. That is my recommendation." "Did you not say your coach was waiting, Dr. Mendelson?" The doctor countered his stern glare with a tight-jawed look of her own. "Forgive me for not offering you tea, but I would never wish to cause you to miss your connection in Bremen."

The man snorted a disgruntled huff, then presented a curt bow. "I should recommend you take my advice to heart, Your Grace. For your own good and none of that of your family. Good day." He gave Celia a snapping nod, then quacked for the door.

Celia followed and closed the doors behind him with a rude bang. "A waste of time. Godspeed, you priggish little man."

"Now, Celia—to let another control your behavior is a sign of weakness. Never relinquish your control, dear girl." Her mother smiled and watched her daughter closer. "Come. We have decisions to make."

"I shall cast a wider net, Mama. There are other medical experts to be found." Celia yanked on the bellpull. They needed tea. Or more something stronger. Mama's favorite pear brandy would not be amiss. "Celia, come here now." Her mother's tone held more than its share of weariness. It echoed with resignation and heartbreaking finality.

Celia pulled a small, cushioned footstool over and sat beside her mother's desk. Taking Mama's hands in hers, she leaned in close. "You must not give up. The doctors I have found so far are nothing more than charlatans and scoundrels fleecing the hopeful. I shall find another. And then another, if necessary. I shall find the ultimate medical professional to help you." She scowled at the closed doors. "Where is Berta? She never takes this long when you ring the bell."

"The doctor sent her to give Cook a recipe for a special calves' foot and some other concoction to build my blood." Duchess Thea wrinkled her nose. "I am sure it will be dreadful, and if I am to die anyway, why should I waste any of my precious few moments on anything dreadful?"

"Mama! Do not say that." Celia rushed to the bellpull and yanked it again and again.

Mrs. Thacker, their generously proportioned housekeeper, trundled into the room, clutching her chest and gasping for air. "Your Grace. Lady Thea. I am here."

"Mrs. Thacker, please sit and catch your breath." The dowager watched

11. a. “His red-faced woman to the nearest chair, then fixed a chiding look on her face.” “And do forgive Lady Cecilia. It seems her impatience knows no bounds today.”

12. b. “Excuse us for a moment, please.” Celia helped the poor woman to the seat. “I am sorry, Mrs. Thackeray, but your useless doctor has me distraught about Mama, and both of us need something stronger than calves’ foot jelly, barley broth, or tea.”

13. c. “Strongly?” The housekeeper waved away the words as her hard breathing slowed and her usual huffing and puffing. “I feared as much about that man.” She pointed her chubby finger high in the air. “That one had a dodgy look about him from the moment he stepped through the front door.”

14. d. “What?” The double doors swung open wider, and Berta entered, bearing a tray filled with cold meats, cheeses, and fruit. Friedrich followed close behind. His tray held a teapot, teacups, and a round-bellied decanter of gold-leafed brandy.

15. e. Mrs. Thackeray pushed herself to her feet and offered both Celia and the duchess a kindly smile. “Forgive me for being so bold, but I thought it might be warranted after that dreadful man overstayed his welcome.”

16. f. “Thank you, Mrs. Thackeray.” Celia blinked hard against those irritatingly persistent tears while scolding herself for being such an emotional creature.

17. g. Now was not the time. She had to be strong and convince Mama to permit her to go to her mother. “All of you take such good care of us.” She turned to include Berta and Friedrich in the praise. Their loyalty and support meant everything. “I do not appreciate you more than you know.”

18. h. “Yes, until now.” Berta dipped a quick curtsy. Her bottom lip quivered, and she swallowed at her red-rimmed eyes. “We are thankful to be here, my lady. You do so much for us.”

19. i. “Not jelly?” Friedrich cleared his throat and bowed his head. “We are proud to be here in this house, my lady. Proud indeed.”

20. j. “Should I?” Dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief, Mrs. Thackeray turned to the duchess and supervised the footman while he set the table. After an approving nod, she turned to the duchess. “Does Your Grace wish to take her tea here, enjoying the sunshine at the window? I can prepare a small lap tray.”

21. k. “No, Mrs. Thackeray. Thank you.” Celia’s mother slowly pushed her chair from the lounge, moved to the table, and, with Friedrich’s help, settled into a chair. “I feel it is important to keep moving. Thank you. You may go now.”



1 Celia. The trio left and closed the doors with a quiet click.  
bounds Celia poured their tea, then added a gentle splash of brandy to the  
She paused with the decanter over her mother's cup. "More?" Mama'  
er. That worried her. She had seemed much healthier before that fool phy:  
nothing visit.

Duchess Thea delicately waved the bottle away. "That is enough fr  
owed to thank you." She took a sip, closed her eyes, and smiled. "Excellent. T  
e shook your father's favorite brandy."

. Saw it Whenever Mama spoke about Father, she was melancholy indeed  
the two had never been in love, they had enjoyed an agreeable fri  
; a tray during their brief marriage. Their union had lasted less than two years  
behind. he was killed in a carriage accident, leaving Mama alone, heavy with  
en pear and praying for the babe to be a son to become the sixth Duke of Ha  
Instead, Celia was born, and Mama, in her desperation, had launched  
and the remarkable endeavor to protect what the world would deny her ch  
ght this because she was a daughter rather than a son.

"This afternoon, I shall write to that Italian physician I read about  
tatingly this week," Celia said. "Remember the one? I showed you the articl  
ninny. sipped her tea, then added more brandy when Mama remained  
r severe. "Remember?" she prodded. "His results are reported to be quite excep  
rta and "Celia." Mama didn't look up from the delicate, gold-rimmed te  
g. "We front of her. She gazed down into it with a faint smile, as if watching  
days unfold. "It is time we accept what is and decide what we shall c  
riped at the time I have remaining." She leaned back in the chair and rested he  
o much on the padded armrests. "There are three things I wish to accomplish b  
find my eternal rest. The first of which is seeing my beloved Londo  
o serve and enjoying this year's Season. Easter came early this year, but we c  
reach Town in time to enjoy a good portion of the season's offerings."  
forward "You wish to travel to London?" Celia could not believe her ears. I  
ng nod, was not safe. They could be discovered. "And enjoy the Season? To  
a while yourself to all those marriage-minded mothers wishing to matc  
daughters with your son, the duke, who is really your daughter—the  
rself up considered suitable to inherit the title, even though she has built the Ha  
d into a dukedom into quite an impressive empire?" Celia shook her head. "Ou  
r all go question. We simply cannot, Mama. It is difficult enough to prot  
extremely complicated venture from here in Germany. Need I remi

that Mrs. Thacker had to dismiss the two newest maids and a few cups, because they took too great an interest in why my imaginary twins pallorvisited us here at the manor?"

sician's "Are you quite finished?" Mama arched a sleek, dark brow.

Celia folded her hands in her lap and proffered an apologetic smile. "Forgive me. You wish to enjoy this year's Season. What are your wishes? You spoke of three."

"I wish to see you happily married to a good man of my choosing." "Mama."

"None of the three are unreasonable or extravagant. Do you not mind?" "Before Mama lifted her cup for another sip, her sharp gaze pinned on Celia's child, while.

"And your third wish?" Celia preferred to know every detail of a most engaging in battle—especially with Mama.

"I told you."

"You did not." Celia added more tea and milk to both their cups. "Earlier with her mother required a sober mind. "You stated your wish to be silent."

"And you happy," her mother added with a subtle tip of her head. "happiness is my third, yet greatest desire."

"You know I can never be presented in London, and you cannot do with number two effectively. "And I am happy." She offered a genuine smile. "As long as you fight to remain alive and well, I am happy."

"You are not happy. You have become an old curmudgeon—sour, miserly sort of person who is interested in nothing but business." "Mama leaned forward and thumped her delicate fist on the table, her face pressed in a hard, flat line. "There is more to life than adding to our London starting new business ventures, and buying more land."

"I am not miserly." How could Mama say such a thing? "When they ever refused a purchase or an expense you requested? And might one not remind you that several of our businesses have set up a great many workshops on their own shops, so they might feed their families and earn a proper living without demeaning or endangering themselves?"

"It is time you helped yourself, my child. There is no shame in that, and you are young, Celia, and trust me, this exciting time of your life is full

ootman Regret filled her mother's eyes and lent a lonely echo to her voice  
1 nevershould be dancing, courting, enjoying your friends." Mama shuddered  
finding the entire subject too exasperating to bear. "At three and twer  
should be a silly, carefree girl dreaming of the perfect husband. In fa  
ic nod, should already be married and providing me with grandchildren. You  
ir otherserious for your age. It pains me to see how terribly I have failed you."

"I have friends," Celia argued. "I wrote to Sophie and Frannie  
' other day." Her defense sounded childish even to her.

"Friends other than those of the Sisterhood." The gentleness of M  
agree?" reprimand gained a sharper edge, cutting like well-honed steel. "You  
all thealso have acquaintances oblivious to our subterfuge. Friends not oper  
we do to keep from losing what they have. Emmeline, Lavinia, and I  
beforethe Sisterhood of Independent Ladies when we all became widowed  
then bore daughters rather than sons. It is a support system, Celia.  
permanent prison for you, Sophie, and Frannie. I intend to meet w  
Battlingsolicitor while in London. It is time you were freed of this terrible farc  
) go to foolish enough to create."

' "Freed? And lose everything we worked for? People depend  
. "YourMama. We cannot lose our businesses, and I cannot believe you wis  
the title go extinct. I couldn't bear to see our entailments revert to the  
t traveluntil some undeserving lout worms them away by fawning all over F  
ne andCelia struggled not to raise her voice even though frustration at the uni  
ile. "As of it all made her want to scream. But she wouldn't shout. Not at

"Your brilliance laid the groundwork for all I have done in the years  
a mosttook over. How can you be so ready to toss it all away?"

siness." "It is time to find a *legal* way to see you cared for and happy." M  
' mouthtaller, reclaiming the persona of the strong, fearless woman Celia had  
coffers, known and loved—the woman Mama had been before she became p  
with days of unrelenting fatigue and pain. "This is not your decision, C  
I have Iis mine, and I will see it done."

: I also Celia pushed away from the table and rose, unable to sit any long  
omen in mind raced through everything that could go wrong, even the  
r livingpossibility that both of them could face numerous charges of fra  
impersonating a peer. Well, they hadn't actually impersonated C  
at. YouMama had merely invented him to keep what should rightly be theirs.  
eeting." doubted very much if that would grant them any leniency w

3. “You prosecuting courts.

ed as if “Surely, you do not expect to go to London and present me to  
ity, you without anyone questioning us about Charles or why we never visit  
ct, your properties in England. And I realize we can have our London town  
are too fully staffed with individuals our Bow Street Runner investigated, but  
’ they not expect the duke to accompany us? Rumors about us will  
just the scandal sheets ablaze.” She spun to face her mother and threw her hair  
the air. “And then I’m sure the courts will get involved. The ladies of  
Mama’s will not allow their husbands to ignore the mysteriousness of our situation  
should The dowager frowned, peering at Celia as though unable to recognize  
ating as “When did you become so dramatic?”

created “When everything I have ever been taught is suddenly con-  
d early, irrelevant. A whim. A way to get by until I could be carted off like  
. Not abbreeding stock and matched with the best stallion.” Celia pointed  
with our mother. “I refuse to sign off on that exorbitant dowry you suggested, and  
e I have never been able to imitate my *Charles* signature.”

Mama rolled her eyes. “I said nothing about presenting you  
on us, Season. I know that is not possible under our rather delicate circumstan-  
h to let could draw the wrong people too close.” She laced her thin fingers to  
Crown and rested her clasped hands in her lap. “I want to go to London  
’rinny.” Season. See you married. Know that you are happy and protected.  
fairness three things. Simple as that.”

Mama. Celia massaged her suddenly throbbing temples. These headaches  
since I only came after hours of wading through ledgers and contracts requiring  
signature—or Charles’s signature, to put a finer point on it. “And when  
ama sat we tell everyone about Charles? Why is he not traveling with us or at  
always the Season in search of a wife?”

plagued “He is on the Continent investigating the most promising business  
Celia. It of his life.” The duchess twitched a dismissive shrug. “And as you  
Charles is but three and twenty. He has plenty of time to marry.”

ger. Her Celia rolled her eyes. “And how do you explain not presenting him  
terrible who is actually past the age for coming out and surely must be frantic  
and for need of a husband?”

Charles. “His sister remained in Germany because of her frail health. Sadly  
But she not able to attend this year’s Season.”

with the “You cannot travel alone.”

“I do not intend to.”

the *ton* “Mama—”

any of “You are quickly reaching the point of being unreasonable.” The d  
nhouse directed Celia back to her chair. “Sit and calm yourself. You are usu  
out will much more creative than this. Are you unwell?”

set the “I am quite well.” Celia hovered behind the chair and clutched the  
ands in wood of its back, digging her nails into the voluptuous upholstery  
the *ton* cushions. “I am simply beside myself because I cannot seem to make  
tion!” sense.”

ize her. “You will accompany me as my companion, Miss Celia Bening, si  
daughter’s ill health and my son’s urgent business ventures prever  
sidered from attending to their ailing mother’s wish to see her beloved Lonc  
e primelast time.”

at her “My, don’t we sound like a pair of ungrateful, self-centered childre  
nd you Her mother smiled as she poured them both a bit more brandy. “W  
know how children can be. Once they are grown, they often have no  
for the their parents. Sit down, Cecilia.”

nces. It Celia took her seat. When Mama used her given name rather th  
ogether usual endearment of Celia, that meant she had endured all her patien  
for the bear. And heaven help Celia if Mama used all the names of her christe  
. Those curiously snapped *Cecilia Elizabeth Madeline Rose Bening* had once  
being sent to bed without her supper. Now it was worse. It meant Ma  
usually so angry that she would not allow Celia back in her presence until her  
ing her had cooled. And sometimes that cooling took more than a day.

at shall After a delicate sip, Celia risked meeting her mother’s gaze and c  
tending help but smile. A healthy rosinness bloomed across Mama’s cheeks an  
flashed in her eyes. The excitement of a trip to London and the d  
s deals prospect of deceiving the *ton* had benefited Duchess Thea more th  
ir twin, amount of specially prepared calves’ foot jelly. Mama had always  
challenge, and admittedly, so did Celia.

s sister, She lifted her teacup in a toast. “To London and the excitement  
cally in Season.”

Mama gently touched her porcelain cup to Celia’s and smile  
r, she is happiness, a good man, and love.”

“Mama.”

Duchess Thea kept her cup against Celia’s and waited with a p

look that refused to be ignored.

“Fine.” With an indulgent sigh, Celia dutifully repeated, “To happiness, good man, and love.”

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look that refused to be ignored.

“Fine.” With an indulgent sigh, Celia dutifully repeated, “To happiness, a good man, and love.”



## CHAPTER TWO

*Law Office of Parkerton, Hodgely, and Kane*  
*London, England*  
*April 1815*

LORD ELIAS RAINES, younger brother to the Duke of Almsbury and partner in the law office of Parkerton, Hodgely, and Kane, marked his name in the current year's Hasterton records. He propped it open with a notebook, set it aside, then selected the previous year's ledger and compared the entries.

"Impossible," he muttered, then flipped through a few more pages, shaking his head. "Impossibly brilliant," he amended. In the span of a few short months, the Duke of Hasterton had more than doubled his vast holdings—almost tripled them. "The man is an utter genius."

No wonder Hasterton had always been a favorite client of Master Hodgely's—God rest his mentor's eccentric soul. Elias sorted through more documents from the prior years, then frowned. The duke's signature differed on this contract. Dramatically so. The dowager duchess must have signed for her son, since he would have been within a few months of majority at that time. Highly irregular for her to sign his name. She should have had His Grace sign in front of witnesses, then initialed it when she purchased that parcel of land.

Elias vaguely remembered Master Hodgely remarking on a few peculiarities about the Hasterton files over the years—such as the transfer of assets from Hasterton accounts to those of an account under the name of Bening, the dowager duchess's maiden name, that was overseen by a solicitor in Germany. His mentor had also mentioned that the fifth Duke of Hasterton had died before the current duke and his twin sister were born. Rather than return to London with her children, Duchess Thea had elected to remain at her family's estate, Bening Manor, in Germany. However, over time, she had no family left alive to assist her. Only servants. The d



had even seen that the young duke received his education abroad.

Reportedly, the man had never set foot in London. He, like his father, retained the office of Parkerton, Hodgely, and Kane to assist with legalities and business dealings while retaining the German services primarily for the Bening holdings. It was quite an odd situation, while Elias's mentor had never expressed an issue about not meeting the current duke, Master Hodgely had bemoaned on more than one occasion that he truly wished he could once again see the duke's lovely mother—lady for which he had always held a great fondness. Of course, when Elias pressed the man for more details, Master Hodgely always changed the subject. Strange behavior, indeed. Now that Master Hodgely had passed

his place, this esteemed client was now his responsibility. After assuming the new position at the firm, Elias had introduced himself to each of his new clients. All were of London's most elite, and he found it important to meet with them face to face and assure them that even though Master Hodgely no longer looked after them, they were still in quite good hands. He had successfully met with everyone except for the Dowager Duchess of Hasterton. That meeting had proven to be somewhat of a challenge, since

Grace never came to London. Of course, Elias could not merely show up at Bening Manor in Germany uninvited. To do so would be the height of rudeness. But as yet, every correspondence he had sent that gently and respectfully requested an introductory meeting had gone unanswered. "Most frustrating," Elias said as he leaned back in his leather chair. The sixth Duke of Hasterton was obviously ignoring him, and there was nothing he could do except wait. A light knock on his office door pulled him from his thoughts. "Enter."

"Messengers just left these, my lord." Young Thomas, the office boy, strode in, deposited several missives into the basket on Elias's desk, and then bowed just as quickly after a respectful dip of his chin.

The letter on top bore an interesting wax seal with which Elias was familiar. Could it possibly be? He snatched it up, turned it to a proper angle, and smiled. It was the Hasterton crest. But this letter hardly appeared to be from the Dowager Duchess of Hasterton, enough to have traveled all the way from Germany.

He hurried to open it and devoured the brief note, hoping it might be an invitation. It did. But he would not be going to Germany. He reread it, this time. The Dowager Duchess of Hasterton requested he call upon

her London townhouse today. She would receive between the hours of five and six. If he was unable to comply with this request, a reply with the most agreeable appointment date and time would be most appreciated.

If he was unable to comply? Elias allowed himself an amused smile indeed. He would clear his schedule immediately for a meeting with the duchess. Perhaps the duke would also be in attendance. After all, now that his mother had decided to partake in the London Season, surely the duke – a dear sister would as well. In fact, this Season might be the sister's debut – a never better reason to show up in London after all these years?

He checked his timepiece, then vainly assessed his attire. Dear God, he and Camp had dutifully brushed his coat and hat within an inch of their lives. He had her son polish his boots. As she had presented his breakfast, she had blessed him with her daily wish for a prosperous day. "Well done, Elias," he said under his breath. Perhaps the grandmotherly lady's wish had resulted in the dowager's note.

He refolded the paper and tucked it into the inside pocket of his buff-colored waistcoat. He then nervously brushed imagined lint and crumbs from his buff-colored breeches. "Remember who you are, Elias," he quietly admonished himself as he placed a selection of the Hasterton files into the fine leather satchel. The night before his brother had presented him upon completion of his education. He donned his hat and gloves, took up the satchel, and headed out.

"I am meeting a client," he informed one of the young men approaching him in the office. "Please inform Parkerton and Kane I am unsure when I will return."

"Yes, my lord," the young man said, his tone filled with envy.

Elias understood completely. He had once been in that lad's position, and he had made a mental note to be more approachable and helpful, as Master Fennell had been with him.

"Shall I get you a hackney, Lord Raines?" Thomas asked while standing by the door.

"That would be most appreciated," Elias said. The Hasterton townhouse was not within reasonable walking distance.

The helpful lad soon had a coach ready, and Elias embarked upon a meeting he had sought for months. Or, at least, he hoped the duke would be present, since he couldn't in good conscience question the dowager's business details.

of three As the coach came to a stop in front of the residence, Elias checked a more watch again. Perhaps he had been a bit overzealous, since it was not yet

He stepped down from the coach and eyed the place as though a port. He descended upon Napoleon's camp.

owager "Should I wait, sir?" the driver called down from his perch.

, if his Elias had no idea and hated feeling as if he were some inexperienced and his Good heavens, he was a respected solicitor, the son of a duke,

t. What esteemed member of the *ton*—although as a *second* son, the estate

commanded was debatable. However, he never had a problem attracting ladies, much to the consternation of their mothers. "Yes. Do wait, gives and he instructed the driver while adding enough to the fare to make it worth a man's while.

e, Mrs. The driver's smile widened as he thumbed through the coinage which had palm. He doffed his hat. "Thank you much, sir. I shall wait here as you like."

jacket, After a decisive nod, Elias strode up the steps and reached a gleaming brass door knocker in the shape of a lion's head with a ring in his mouth. He rapped three times for luck.

chel his The door quickly swung open, revealing the stern countenance of an older man still muscular enough to oust any unwanted visitor with a

flick of his thick wrist. His scowling demeanor suggested he was quite an enticing protective butler. "May I help you, sir?"

I shall "Lord Elias Raines from Parkerton, Hodgely, and Kane. Her Grace is expecting me."

"Welcome, my lord." The butler stepped back and held the door wide enough for Elias to pass, then quickly closed it. "Her Grace is not to be expected here until you would arrive during receiving hours."

Elias almost smiled at the merest hint of rebuke in the gruff man's holding. "Yes, I am early," he admitted as he handed over his hat and gloves. "I hope Her Grace will forgive me."

house The butler's expression remained unchanged. He merely responded. "Your bag, my lord?"

on the Elias tucked the satchel under his arm. "I shall keep this with me. I would also like to see you."

r about The door to their immediate left popped open, revealing a lovely woman with an even more furious scowl than the butler. She huffed at

ked hisebony curl out of her eyes while shuffling through an armload of books at three papers. “Gransdon, are you quite certain all the trunks have been placed about to the proper rooms? I am missing at least three ledgers that are important.”

“I will check again, *Miss Bening*.” The butler cleared his throat and tried to warn the lady they had company.

The exquisite beauty’s head jerked up, and her pale, green-eyed eyes homed in on Elias. “I beg your pardon, my lord,” she said with a curtsy. “I was not aware of the time.” Her eyes narrowed as though she couldn’t decide whether to welcome him or have Gransdon escort him forth. “Lord Raines, I presume? Her Grace mentioned she had sent for you.”

“Yes, Lord Elias Raines at your service, Miss Bening.”

What a breathtaking woman she was with her tousled curls of glacial blue framing her high cheekbones. And the unusual shade of her eyes, pale yet brilliant green, like those of a fierce kitten sizing him up and for the from the butler’s manner toward her, this woman was no servant.

Elias politely tipped his head, determined to become better acquainted with the delightful Miss Bening. “Forgive me for calling before three.”

She responded with a slight humming noise that reminded him of a cat purring and piqued his interest even more. Then she gifted him with a quite yet detached smile. “You will find Her Grace very forgiving,” she said. “You would be so kind as to follow Gransdon down to the parlor, I should like to see Her Grace know you are here.”

“Thank you, Miss Bening.” Elias found himself entranced, watching her glide up the stairs with the fluid grace of a hawk soaring into the heavens. Her muslin gown, a soft green that brought out her eyes, swirled around her, offering a teasing glimpse of her tempting curves.

Gransdon cleared his throat twice. When Elias turned his way, the butler directed him to follow down the hallway to a set of double doors on the right.

“The parlor, my lord.”

“Thank you.” Elias strolled through the doors, taking in the tasteful opulence. The furnishings whispered of elegance in gentle tones, and delicate blue and green florals. Small, round mahogany tables adorned with petite vases of flowers were situated among the perfect number of young and sofas. Not too cluttered nor too sparse. Rich draperies of the finest burgundy framed the wall of windows, and the panes between were set

books and with sheer lace panels to assure a modicum of privacy. A decidedly feminine room. As a duchess's parlor should be.

The most Elias caught the butler before he exited. "Grandson—is His Grace here today?"

But the man's jaw flexed, as though hardening at the impertinent question. "We do not expect His Grace today, my lord." With a proper bow he retreated and closed the double doors behind him before Elias could say anything more.

"Not expected *today*?" Elias repeated under his breath, frustrated by the subtle insinuation that perhaps they did not expect His Grace's arrival.

He scowled at the doors, willing them to provide more information. The duke had not allowed his mother and sister to travel unprotected from Germany. Perhaps the man had seen them settled in a townhouse, then gone to the club to update himself about London. Yes, his prey had to be the case.

The double doors opened once more, and Elias almost forgot his manners. With a delayed start, he stood and offered a proper bow. "Your Grace's elderly dowager he had expected did not exist. The Duchess of Hasterton is a soft regal beauty. Older, yes, but still the sort of woman that made a man take a polite second and even a third glance.

"Lord Raines." She kindly directed him to a different chair. "Thank you so much for responding to my request so promptly. I know we are not your only client." She gracefully motioned for Miss Bening to come closer. "I am glad to hear you have already met my Celia—Miss Celia Bening. She is a delightful companion on this visit to London."

Companion? Elias politely smiled while sorting through the whirlwind of inferences clamoring in his head. He offered a less dramatic nod to the butler Bening. "Yes, I had the pleasure of meeting her earlier," he said, while it was clear that the resemblance between the two women was remarkable. He

remembered that *Bening Manor* was Her Grace's family home in Germany. Perhaps Miss Bening was not only a companion but a relation. Odd, but according to all the information in his files, the Hasterton/Bening line had died out. The duke, the dowager, and the duke's sister were the last living members of the two families.

"Lord Raines?" Miss Bening said, her louder tone tinged with a hint of irritation.

eminine “I beg your pardon.” Elias bowed to them both again, then settled in a chair. While he had stood there sorting through this puzzlement, the race infoolhardy schoolboy, both ladies had seated themselves. “Do forgive me, the two of you share quite a lovely resemblance.” He tried to soften up of the boldness with a laugh as he turned to the duchess. “I recall Bening was your first bow, family name before marriage, Your Grace. Is Miss Bening a long-lost friend you would ask perhaps?”

“You, my lord, are very impertinent,” Miss Bening interjected before the dowager could answer. “It is truly a pity our trusted Master Hodgely is no longer with us.”

Surely, “Celia!” The dowager lightly patted her foot in Miss Bening’s direction before turning to Elias with an indulgent, albeit somewhat weary, smile. “I beg to forgive her, my lord. We only arrived in London late yesterday, and I know how it is, that dear Miss Bening does not travel well at all.”

“Think nothing of it, Your Grace.” Elias stored away the lovely dowager’s reaction for further rumination later. “Miss Bening is quite right. Her rudeness is inexcusable, and I assure you it will not happen again.” The dowager returned Her Grace’s indulgent smile, then also offered one to Miss Bening. “I too wish Master Hodgely was still with us. He was not only my mentor but much like a father to me. He is greatly missed.”

Thank you The duchess hitched in a sharp sniff, then bowed her head as if not struggling for composure. “Raymond was a dear friend. News of his passing was a great loss to our household. He brought us great sorrow.”

He is my mentor “Indeed.” Elias bowed his head out of respect for his mentor. After allowing a quiet moment, he glanced over at the satchel he had placed in another chair. “I took the liberty of bringing your files today. I thought perhaps Miss Grace might like to review them once I attended to the matters for which I was invited here.”

When he “His Grace is still abroad,” Miss Bening said a little too curtly. “I am sorry. Lady Cecilia remained in Germany as well. Unfortunately, her health is somewhat more fragile than Her Grace’s.”

He had all Elias sensed Miss Bening did not like him at all and was also looking for something. Something important. He prided himself on his ability to identify a person and figure them out—discover the truths they didn’t wish to admit. A hint of Master Hodgely had often remarked that that was one of Elias’ exemplary talents. He looked forward to discovering the *real* Miss Ber

into his “I am truly sorry to hear of Lady Cecilia’s poor health,” he  
like responded. He would make no more remarks of a personal nature until  
me, but completed further research on this unusual situation. He turned  
then his dowager. “How can I be of service to Your Grace?”

as your “I require a last will and testament. Immediately.”

cousin, It was then that Elias noticed a frailness plaguing the lady. She  
unusual weariness settled beneath her pale green eyes, making them  
fore the almost sunken. A hollowness accentuated her high cheekbones. She  
y is not a lovely woman, but struggling to remain so, and was entirely too thin  
possessed an almost fragile translucence—like the finest porcelain  
direction knew without a doubt that Her Grace was dying. He had watched his  
le. “Do not fade from this world in much the same way.

fear my “I can absolutely see to your will immediately, Your Grace. In fact  
would like, I shall return tomorrow well before receiving hours so as  
Celia’s hinder any of your social engagements.”

ht. My “That will not be necessary, Lord Raines.” The duchess appeared  
n.” He struggled with her composure as she turned to Miss Bening. “My list,  
Bening. Do be kind enough to fetch it.”

mentor, “Of course, Your Grace.” Miss Bening rose and hurried from the room.  
“I feel I understand the need for expediency, Your Grace, but are you  
though quite certain you wish to do this today?” Elias wondered if the ailing  
passing might need a rest. Her extreme fatigue had become even more acute  
during their short visit. “After all, you said you arrived late yesterday.  
: After a sure traveling from Germany is quite arduous.”

aced in The duchess’s rueful smile didn’t soften the resentment in her eyes.  
ght His appear so frail as to offend you, my lord?”

ich you “You could never offend me, Your Grace.” He could tell the duchess  
hated that her life was being stolen from her, and he didn’t blame her for  
it. “And are a beautiful woman whom fate has treated quite unfairly. I wish it were  
is even so.”

She fixed him with a piercing stare that seemed almost calculating.  
“Hiding much did Master Hodgely tell you about the Hasterton line?”

read a Elias sensed she was asking him a great deal more than if he was  
to share with their files. “He always spoke of Your Grace and your children  
s most much fondness and admiration when informing me of the appalling  
ing. condition of the estate, and how it should be managed.” He paused, w

politely her closely. "Master Hodgely gave me the impression that he considered he had account the most important of all his clients."

to the Before the duchess could respond, Miss Bening returned to the duchess. "Forgive me for the delay, Your Grace," she said as she handed the duchess a long, narrow envelope bearing the Hasterton seal. "It appears the duchess has attended to the library and moved it. I shall speak to Mrs. Hasterton immediately regarding how the servants will address a door locked by the duchess."

in. She What an unusual thing to say. Elias also noted the high coloring of the duchess's cheeks. The lady was frustrated to no end, and as fiercely protected of the dowager as a lioness protecting her young.

"It is all right, Celia," the duchess said after examining the envelope. "The seal is still intact. Do not be too hard on them. Remember, we are not to do that to them."

Miss Bening cleared her throat with a nervous cough, then turned to Elias. "Would you care for tea, my lord? Forgive me for being so rude, Celia? should have offered it earlier."

"That would be most lovely, Miss Bening, and no apology is necessary. As Her Grace pointed out, the two of you have barely had sufficient time to settle into your household here in London—since arriving late last night the duchess wondered if she would pick up on his speaking of the household as though it belonged to her as well as the duchess."

y. I am She did.

"Her Grace's household," Miss Bening gently corrected him, without the slightest hint of displeasure creasing her brow. She excused herself with a subtle nod, then stepped into the hall and spoke quietly to Grandson.

duchess A deep, rumbling "At once, my lady, and I do apologize most heartily. You came from that direction, but Elias couldn't pick up on Miss Bening's response. He did, however, find Grandson's reference to her as *my lady* interesting indeed.

duchess "How "Here is my list, Lord Raines," the dowager announced in a loud voice while waving the envelope at him. "The terms I require in my will. I trust my familiar will put everything in order and bring it here for my signature by tomorrow evening with "By tomorrow, Your Grace?" Elias hefted the envelope in one hand. It obviously contained several pages.

duchess "Yes. Tomorrow." The duchess's eyes gleamed with iron



ed your determination. “I want nothing left to chance. No loose ends. The c  
from Germany made me quite aware of my mortality, and those thin  
e room, which I have no control.”

chess a “Tea will be here shortly,” Miss Bening said as she rejoined the  
e maids gaze settled on the envelope Elias held. “If you would like to review  
e arcourt while we wait, that would be most acceptable. After all, there might b  
e one of you wish to clarify.”

He found it interesting that a lady’s companion would make  
on Miss statement about something that had absolutely nothing to do with her.  
e ctive didn’t comment on Miss Bening’s unusual behavior. Instead, he turne  
to the duchess. “Do you wish me to do so, Your Grace? Review the l  
velope, and now?”

are new After a quick glance at Miss Bening, the dowager nodded. “Yes. I  
would be best.”

med to Elias carefully opened the packet and scanned the sheets of instr  
e miss. If finding all the terms quite unusual. The dowager duchess’s Bening h  
appeared quite impressive—if this account was accurate. He would  
e ssary, confirm the figures with the records back at his office.

time to The solicitor in Germany, Erwin Von Gaelinson, was listed  
ht.” He individual overseeing the duchess’s original provision account that wa  
ough it when she married the duke. Elias remembered that name appearing  
transfers from the Hasterton accounts to the Bening account he had h

The man’s contact information was listed, and he wished to re  
with the witnessed copy of the will upon its completion. Nothing unusual there.

with a However, Elias had always found their need for an additional s  
quite surprising, since Her Grace had expressed such trust and affec  
eartily” Master Hodgely. Their office could have easily and efficiently handle  
e ning’s her accounts.

ly quite When he reached the final page of the document, he came up sh  
read it twice. The duchess wished for everything to be placed in a t  
d voice Miss Bening. Not a single item mentioned her daughter or her sor  
ust you surprising, indeed. He lifted his gaze from the documents and looked  
rrow?” into the duchess’s sharp-eyed stare. “This is most unusual, Your Grac  
and. It must caution that your son and daughter could successfully contest  
will.”

i-willed Before the duchess could respond, Miss Bening huffed a very unl

rossingsnort. "It is my understanding, my lord, that the Hasterton holdings v  
gs overbe affected. After all, we have already settled everything that belonged  
fifth Duke of Hasterton upon the sixth, including provisions for a g  
m. Herdowry for Lady Cecilia. Is that not so?"

the list "That is my understanding," Elias said while attempting to ig  
e itemsgrowing uneasiness in his gut. Instinct told him there was so muc  
going on here of which he was not aware. He returned his attention  
such aduchess. "But this still raises the question. Do you wish nothing to go  
But hedaughter? Not even your jewelry?"

ed back "She has jewelry of her own, and her brother will see to her un  
ist heretime as she marries." The duchess suddenly became cold and detach  
lifted her chin in defiance. "And of course, once she marries, eve  
agree itbecomes her husband's property. Correct?"

"Yes, Your Grace. That is the usual way of it. Except for v  
actions,stipulated in the marriage contract to be saved for her and any future cl  
oldingsshould she become widowed."

have to "Yes." The duchess spat out the word as though it tasted foul.  
heavens for a proper marriage contract to protect those deemed irrele  
as theEngland's legal system."

s set up Bitterness and resentment thickened the air of the parlor like a  
on theLondon fog. Elias rose from his seat. "Perhaps I should take my leave  
andled.to work on your documents." He carefully tucked the papers back in  
ceive aenvelope, then stowed them safely inside his satchel. A strange storm  
in this residence, and he wanted no part of it until armed with  
olicitorinformation. He offered both ladies a proper bow.

tion for "No tea, then, my lord?" Miss Bening asked in a decidedly vic  
d all oftone.

"Thank you, no. Perhaps another time." He paused and unab  
ort andstudied her. Was this mysterious beauty as cunningly avaricious  
rust fordowager's request portrayed her to be?

1. Most "You are staring, my lord," she said. "Is there something else you  
straightsay?"

e, and I "Not at this particular time." Elias squared his shoulders, su  
such alooking forward to a battle of wits with this lovely lady. And with ar  
so much more. He didn't sense greed from her. More like a subtle le  
adyliketinged with desperation—but why?

will not “I promise you, though,” he said, “you and I shall have much to discuss to the future.”

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“I promise you, though,” he said, “you and I shall have much to discuss in the future.”



## CHAPTER THREE

CELIA PEEPED THROUGH the side window framing the door. The handsome, infuriating Lord Raines strode to the awaiting hackney with the powerful grace of the restless panther that had entranced her at the meeting in Germany. The man was dangerous to their cause, yet something about him made her ache to know him better. She yearned to see him again, to apologize for behaving like an overly protective, bitter shrew. A despondent sigh fogged the window. How else could she behave? She would not let anyone too close or share too much information. She allowed the door to sheer to fall back in place and returned to the parlor.

“That did not go well at all,” she said to her mother as she returned to her seat. “The man suspects something and is sure to go digging. I am certain of it.”

“I agree.” Her mother released a weary sigh. “We must become better at portraying ourselves as a dowager and her companion rather than mother and daughter. I fear we failed miserably with Lord Raines.”

They both went silent as Gransdon entered, followed by Friedrich, the loyal footman from Germany, and Reginald, the new English footman. Gransdon bore trays with every item required for a proper tea.

“That will be all, gentlemen.” Gransdon dismissed the footmen with a curt nod. “I shall serve Her Grace and Miss Bening.”

Friedrich and Reginald bowed, then hurried out.

Gransdon served the duchess, then Celia, without commenting on the missing Lord Raines.

“Thank you, Gransdon,” Duchess Thea said. “That will be all.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” He gave a respectful bow, then strode out and closed the doors as if understanding their unspoken need for privacy.

“And that is another issue.” Celia hated the feeling of their order crumbling. Her inability to control every nuance suffocated her. “You know, Mr. Elkin assured us that his Bow Street Runners had thoroughly assessed

the servants and guaranteed their loyalty. Earlier, Gransdon addressed *my lady*, and I am most certain that Lord Raines couldn't help but o that man's loud, booming voice."

"I am sure he heard it because I did. And by the way, Mr. Elkin *mine*." The duchess rolled her eyes, then took another sip of her tea and returned the delicate porcelain cup to its saucer, then shot Celia an angry look. "Mr. Elkin guaranteed their loyalty. Not their ability to play some yet complicated charade as well as we do—which, I might reiterate, we face the same miserably today." She shuddered as though thoroughly disgusted. "A man in a menagerie must stop being so defensive. Has it ever occurred to you that if you put out Lord Raines's sense of self-importance and throw a flirtatious compliment in his two his way, he would overlook a multitude of sins while proudly plucking his feathers? You must handle men a certain way, Celia. Use your best and dare your advantage."

"I am sorry, but I do not like him. He is too..." Celia paused, searching for an appropriate and also acceptable description for the frustrating incident to her Raines. He had caught her off guard in the hallway when he arrived, and she certainly hated being put at a disadvantage. And it wasn't that she didn't like him really. Or wouldn't. Blast! Blast! Blast!

"He is too what?" her mother curtly prompted. "Too intelligent and inquisitive for our own good?" She set her tea on the table and fished her hands in her lap. "That is exactly the sort of solicitor we require. Has he handled our accounts as efficiently as Raymond?"

"Both." "Impertinent," Celia snapped, ignoring her mother's affectionate reference to Master Hodgely. "Lord Raines is entirely too impertinent with you can tell by his behavior that he thinks far too highly of himself."

"There is nothing wrong with a man having a good opinion of himself," her mother said. "He did not give me an inflated perception of his own worth on the merely good self-esteem. I could accuse you of possessing that same vanity you know." The duchess's eyes narrowed. "Or do you dislike him because he obviously appears interested in you?"

"His only interest in me is proving me to be a fraud. I read it in his eyes."

"They were quite intense, those blue eyes of his."

"Topaz, Mama. Those dark golden eyes of his reminded me of the eyes of our Mr. panther in the menagerie we visited in Hamburg."

Her mother's sly smile revealed Celia had just stepped into a snare.

1 me assurprisingly, the duchess didn't indulge in an immediate moment of g  
verhearinstead, she nodded at the teapot and lifted her cup. "Be a dear, Celia  
this tea has already gone cold."

1 is not Celia clenched her teeth, bracing herself for the next comment re  
ea. SheLord Raines. With a forced smile, she took the half-empty cup to th  
ccusingand replaced it with the one meant for the irritating solicitor. "A sha  
ay thisdidn't request they stock any pear brandy here." She filled the extra c  
ailed attea and added a dollop of milk and a drizzle of honey.

nd you "Indeed." Her mother accepted her fresh tea with a smug tilt of he  
ou feed"And now, shall we address how you should behave toward the gold  
ment orLord Raines in the future?"

reening "We shall not discuss—"

auty to Thankfully, the parlor doors opened and Gransdon announced  
Dowager Marchioness of Ardsmere and Lady Ardsmere, as well  
archingDowager Countess of Rydleshire and Lady Sophie, are here to call o  
g LordGrace and Lady Ceci—Miss Bening." He flinched as though struck  
and sheunseen force and bowed his head. "Forgive me, Miss Bening.  
ce him,endeavor to do better."

"Thank you, Gransdon. Please do try to remember." Celia tried no  
ent andtoo harsh with the poor man. For whatever reason, Mama had ch  
ted herreveal Celia's true identity, and she prayed that decision would not l  
s he notdownfall. "And please show the ladies in. We were expecting them."

He bowed again, then quickly retreated from the deluge of Sop  
tionateFrannie's joyful shrieks as they burst into the room without waiting  
nt, andescort.

"Celia!" Frannie squealed, her dark blonde ringlets fluttering wild  
mself,"came up short and offered a quick curtsy to the duchess. "Your Grace!  
worth, "My Celia!" Sophie shouted with even shriller effervescence. 'e  
ie trait,missed you so very much!" She aimed a running curtsy at the duchess  
ause heGrace! It is so good to see you too."

"Sophie! Frannie!" Celia vaulted into their arms and hugged the  
eyes." tightly. She could be honest with these dear souls and not fear retri  
because they too played the game of stealing the life denied them l  
at largethey were born female. "I have missed both of you so very much.  
simply do not do our friendship justice."

ire. But "Our sisterhood," Frannie corrected her, with an arm around Celia

loating; other around Sophie. She hugged them both closer. "You two are my  
a. I fear and I shall not hear you addressed as anything less."

"My goodness, girls," exclaimed the Dowager Marchioness of Ar  
gardingas she swept in behind them. "All of London surely heard that ent  
ie table Before the young ladies could defend themselves, the marchioness be  
ame we teary-eyed smile at Celia's mother. "Thea, my dearest Thea." She  
up with over, scooped up both of the duchess's hands, and lost the battle to ho  
tears.

er head. The duchess teetered on the verge of tears as well. "It is so good  
en-eyed you, Emmie."

"I took the liberty of ordering more tea and whatever brandy you l  
hand," announced the Dowager Countess of Rydleshire as she strode  
l, "The room like a war hero. Her thin face softened with a sad smile as she ru  
as the take one of the duchess's hands away from the marchioness. "Share, I  
n Your I have missed her as much as you have." She leaned in and pecked  
c by a kiss on each of the duchess's cheeks. "Darling Thea. You should ha  
I shall for us sooner. We could have just as easily come to you in Germany."

"Oh, Nia... I needed to see my beloved London one last time. An  
ot to be you here with me. Where we began our friendship." The duchess bov  
osen to head and gave way to her sorrow. The countess and marchioness k  
be theireither side of her and hugged in close, clinging to her as they all  
unashamedly.

hie and Celia blinked furiously and turned away from the heart-wrenchin  
for his Mama never openly wept. Never.

Sophie caught hold of her arm and gently whispered, "Is there a c  
lly. She room where we might go?"

"Good idea." Frannie glanced back at their mothers. "They need  
I have privacy, as we need ours."

. "Your Not trusting herself to speak, Celia waved for them to follow h  
library would do. Especially since she wished to eventually go over a  
m both the ledgers with Frannie and benefit from the girl's brilliance abou  
tribution, business projections. Sophie could offer advice regarding the Bow  
because Runner's reports on the servants and perhaps even help with the inf  
Letters Lord Raines. Sophie's expertise lay in stealth, tactical planning, and de

If Celia's heart didn't ache so much for her precious mother, she  
and the laugh. Rather than excel at needlework, painting, or the pianoforte, F



sisters, Sophie, and she had magnificently conquered the successful run of businesses, the making of promising investments, and spy warfare with a mere feminine touch.

"Grace." Gransdon met them halfway down the hall. "Might I be of service to you, Miss Bening?"

"A tea for the three of us in the library would be much appreciated, Gransdon." Celia offered the gray-haired giant a sympathetic smile.

It was more than a little obvious that he still berated himself for his earlier failure to see the tongue.

"Right away, miss." He bowed, then disappeared down an adjacent hallway.

"Did you bring your servants from Germany?" Sophie asked as she continued on to the library.

Emmie. "Only a few. I wish we had brought more, since they are not accustomed to keeping our secrets safe from the light of day." Celia had sent them into the disheveled library of books, papers, and partially unopened trunks.

"Mr. Elkin validated these London servants, but I still find the whole thing questionable."

"If Mr. Elkin scrutinized their backgrounds, they *should* suit." She felt her auburn brows draw together in a frown that resembled more of a sob than a pout. She twiddled with a coppery red curl, wrapping it around her finger.

"Elkin is a senior member of the Bow Street Runners. Mama and I worked with him frequently and found him to be quite infallible."

"I fear their suitability is not the sole issue here." Celia cleared her throat, drawing books off the chairs, then allowed herself a heavy sigh as she motioned her friends to sit. "For our ruse to be convincing, the servants need to be their accomplished actors as well."

"And as fiercely loyal and protective as trained hounds." Frannie perched on her seat as though ready to spring to her feet at a moment's notice. A few nervous traits of jiggling her leg made her skirts quiver. "Whenever Mama and I travel from Belgium, the entire household comes with us."

"But how do you keep your properties tended to when they're empty?" Frannie asked. Celia assumed the very unladylike position of propping back against the side of her desk and crossing her feet at the ankles. That was the beauty of the library: it would be her and Sophie's company. She could behave any way she liked. These sisters, Frannie, choice loved her unconditionally. "Do you merely keep the houses

ring of until you intend to use them?"

with a "Absolutely." Frannie's sapphire-blue eyes flashed beneath her brows, and she twitched her leg faster. "It is much more cost-effective, Missopen properties whenever we are here in London. Our trips have become more frequent of late, but not so much as to warrant employing more appreciated, see to the residence while we are home in Belgium."

It was "Back to the most important matter at hand," Sophie said. "Your slip of was most alarming. I can see your mother is unwell, but from your report expected her to be too weak to leave her bed, much less travel from Germany to London."

Celia hugged herself and stared down at the floor. "She has her good days as they are and bad—and the bad days are becoming more frequent than the good. I am afraid." She lifted her head and fixed her dear friends with a despondent gaze. "But you know how our mothers are when they set their minds on something. She refused to be deterred. Not even by illness. She insisted on coming to London."

and them "There is more troubling you than your mother's mortality," Frannie said with the cutting bluntness that made her advice indispensable to Sophie's reviewing contracts.

stupidous "Frannie!" Sophie swatted the girl's arm. "This is not some trivial investment we are discussing. Could you possibly show a modicum of empathy for our dear Celia?"

"Celia knows I love her and would do anything to help her avoid vices. I know what she lacks of all know cannot be changed." Frannie snorted like an irritated horse. She shifted her focus back to Celia. "Out with it. You cannot hide anything from me. Just be honest, and nor should you have to, or even try."

"Frannie is right about that," Sophie said with a curt nod that set her dark hair in a perched cascade of coppery ringlets aquiver.

ce. Her "I fear we are soon to be discovered." Celia pulled in a deep breath and preparing to explain, then jerked and pushed off the desk as Grandson entered, knocked, then entered the library with their tea. The man set her on an empty chair. "Absolutely no reason whatsoever. Or perhaps she was just on edge because of the edge they were in London, and she very much doubted Mama would ever let Frannie to make the return trip to Germany."

sters by "What would she do then? How would she explain the absence of Duke of Hasterton and his sister, Lady Cecilia, when they didn't appear?"

the funeral? Or would she simply need to transport Mama back to Germany and lay her to rest there with little or no ceremony? She could always do that, but Mama wished to be buried beside Father, and for once, that would be the truth.

She massaged her throbbing temples. This was not as simple as faking a birth announcement or claiming one twin was ill while having the other letter-christened, and then playing the ruse all over again a week later so everyone would report, I thought that both she and her brother had been duly baptized in the German church. God bless Nanny Hildegarde for helping with the complicated cover-up throughout Celia's childhood—or at least until the imaginary Charles died. The age of attending boarding schools and then expanding his schooling to a good foreign university.

"Will there be anything else?" Gransdon asked, interrupting her thoughts. He hovered over the table of tea and cakes, looking at Celia with his eyebrows arched like a hound perking its ears.

"This is quite perfect, Gransdon. Thank you." Celia forced a smile. He bowed, then left the room. As soon as he closed the door behind him, she sagged back against the edge of the desk.

"Why do you fear you're soon to be discovered?" Sophie rose and poured the future tea, serving Celia first. "Is it a matter of security? I can help with the matter." "And I can help with a few discreet inquiries," Frannie volunteered. Celia accepted a cup from Sophie, then scooted back deeper into her chair. "What went wrong without resources?"

"What do you know about Lord Elias Raines of Parkerton, Hodgely from Kane?" Celia sipped her tea, then recalled the liquor cabinet she discovered built into the shelves behind the desk. As she went in to set her spirits suitable for mixing with tea, she cast a glance back at her friend. "He ascended to the position of partner upon the death of our Master Hodgely, a solicitor we trusted for many years." She pulled a decanter from the cabinet and sniffed the contents. Brandy. Not pear, but it would do. She offered a drop for Frannie and Sophie. They both held out their cups for a soothing drink. "Because of the fact, I am positive that Master Hodgely held a great fondness for Marjorie. He would be able to help her for him. Unfortunately, their union would not only have made her a social outcast but also cost Master Hodgely his London clientele. I am sure that if she married my father." Celia sighed, regretting her mother's many sacrifices over the years—all in the name of acceptability and keeping everyone

er many but herself.

she claimed “Lord Elias Raines,” Sophie repeated, as though sorting through her thoughts. “Isn’t he the younger brother of the Duke of Almsbury?”

Frannie went still with her teacup partway to her mouth and narrowed her eyes. “I remember him. We sometimes use Parkerton at that same time. The other Lord Raines came with Parkerton to assist him when we required a change in wording in a contract, and they refused to make the change until we reached church.” She beamed with a proud smile. “They think I am the Marchioness of Ardsmere, and that my husband trusts me implicitly to operate in his stead since his mother, the dowager marchioness, so often lauds my astuteness.”

“And Lord Raines?” Celia prompted, hoping for helpful information.

Frannie gave her a tight-lipped look. “Deucedly clever and stubborn. The point of being dangerous as an adder. Once he gets the scent, Parkerton said nothing will veer him from the hunt.”

“Is he the one with whom Lady Castledown had that rather interesting affair?” Sophie asked.

“No.” Frannie made a face. “That was his brother. Are you having a good day, Sophie? Even from your villa in France, you normally have your finger on the pulse of the *ton*’s gossip.”

With an irritated huff, Sophie rolled her eyes and took another sip of tea.

“What else do you know about Lord Raines other than his stubbornness?” Celia added more brandy to all their cups, then wondrously, and she should have stayed her hand. Keeping Sophie and Frannie on topic had sometimes be as difficult as herding wild rabbits.

“Quite handsome, as I remember. Dark, curly hair cut in the latest fashion. Broad shoulders. Narrow waist. Impressively muscular and ruggedly, stunning in buff-colored pantaloons that show off his powerful legs.” Celia frowned as she took a heartier sip of her brandy-laced tea while gazed it into the distance. “And the most unusual eyes. Like rare tiger eye gemstones. From South Africa. A golden, honeyed richness.”

“I believe you have had enough brandy,” Celia said while offering her a slice of cake to Frannie. “Best offset it by eating.”

So, she said “It sounds to me as if she has had enough of virginity,” Sophie said with a very unladylike snort. “Isn’t it so lovely to be able to say whatever we wish with each other without fear of retribution?” She offered Celia a

smile. “What are *your* thoughts on the beguiling Lord Raines?”

ugh her “He is not beguiling. He is infuriating, impertinent, and the worrisome risk Mama and I have ever taken.”

ved her Sophie straightened and immediately became serious. “What risk?” office. Celia braced herself, knowing that Sophie and Frannie would be different about not being consulted regarding her mother’s will. And she consented with a groan, but Mama had adamantly refused, stating they would do it as they wished and would brook no argument. “Mama requested Lord Raines to stand up a will that places all of her personal assets and unentailed properties in trust for me, her companion, Miss Bening—leaving nothing to her son or daughter. Not even her jewelry.”

born to “Oh, Celia,” Frannie and Sophie groaned in unison.

rkerton “You are now the fox and Lord Raines is the relentless hound,” Frannie said.

discreet “I fear you are correct.” Celia set her tea on the desk beside her, and massaged her temples that no longer throbbed but pulsed. “And I have no idea what to do about it. If he finds out that Charles is nothing more than an imaginary means to an end...”

“He could have you both charged with fraud.” Sophie’s ominous words made Celia’s head hurt even more. “They do not look kindly on preterites who would be a peer.”

clever “We are not pretending to be one,” Celia said, knowing the argument was ridiculous. “We created one.”

c could “You have signed his name ever since you took over running the household.” Frannie said. “At the very least, they could imprison you and your mother for the latest forgery, proclaim the title extinct, and revert everything you and your mother had quite hard worked for to the Crown to either be kept or doled out to Frannie and Prinny’s favorites.”

ring off “You have systematically transferred monies and lands from Hasterton holdings to your mother’s Bening accounts that her marriage contract should she become widowed, correct?” Sophie groaned and shook her head. “Lord Raines could very well presume that you and your mother were attempting to fleece the Duke of Hasterton of his wealth. Why in hell with a name did you choose to pose as Miss *Bening* rather than Miss *Name-None*?”

teasing “Lord Raines is sure to notice.” Frannie rose, set her tea aside,

wrapped an arm around Celia's shoulders. "You never make such a most mistakes. Not ever." She gave Celia a gentle, sympathetic shake. "You of losing your mother has you at your wits' end."

"Would you not be the same?" Celia couldn't remain brave and st with fuss longer. She covered her face and sobbed. "I cannot imagine doing completely without her. It has always been just the two of us, united against the as she And now I am so afraid *that man* and his rummaging about is going to es drawer demise come even faster."

s into a "Dearest Celia," Frannie cried, hugging her as Sophie rushed in or her them both.

"I know the course to take." Sophie pushed away and took hold of by the shoulders. Excitement shone on her face. "Seduce him." Frannie Celia stared at Sophie. "Have you gone mad, or is it merely the talking?"

closed "Think about it." Sophie gave her a gentle shake. "If the man b ounded besotted with you, he will protect you. Do you not think Master F arles isknew the truth all those years and yet said nothing?"

Sophie's observation did possess merit. Celia chewed on the corne us tonelip. "I am not certain if Master Hodgely knew the extent of our endea iding tonot, but I do know he loved Mama." She lowered her voice even th was just them in the room. "I accidentally read one of his corresponde ent washer."

"And how exactly do you *accidentally* read someone estate," correspondence?" Frannie asked with a coy tilt of her head.

ther for Celia haughtily drew herself up even though she still felt a twinge mother about what she had done. "I saw it was from the law office and thoug l out to be business." She wrinkled her nose and sheepishly admitted, "And started reading it, I could not seem to stop." Her heart still ached wh asterton she remembered Master Hodgely's loving prose, and she wondered ract set would be like to have someone feel such a depth of affection for ook her wistful sigh escaped before she could stop it.

her are "If that sigh is any indication of the love Master Hodgely felt f eaven's mother," Frannie said, "then I would wager he knew the truth abo lo-One-family. Sophie is right. Seduce Lord Raines to either distract him con or force him to become so infatuated with you that he would never de, and your secrets." She twitched a shrug. "You have your mother's beauty.

careless said when she and Sophie's mother presented at court, all eyes followed her terror mother." Frannie offered a generous smile. "The only reason they did it was because of her sweet nature and how she helped Mama hide the comic anyhem of her petticoat so no one else would know."

all *this* "I have no idea how to seduce a man," Celia said through clenched world. Even the thought of attempting such a thing made her palms go all damp to make unpleasant. She gave Sophie a dubious look. "How do *you* do it?"

Sophie's rich brown eyes widened. "I have never done it."

to hug "You suggested it," Celia insisted.

"That does not mean I've done it." Sophie turned to Frannie. "What of Celia you? Your mother wrote to mine about how everyone's attention was at Lady..." She frowned. "I don't recall her name, but she was

brandy Belgium's most esteemed peers. You were the center of attention at her Frannie's fair cheeks flushed an alarming shade of red. I becomes embellished my popularity at the ball to mask her mortification. I lodgedly center of attention because my heel snagged in the braided trim of drapery, and I unknowingly almost yanked it off the wall when I r of her across the dance floor."

avors or Celia covered her mouth to keep from gaping at her poor friend ough it Frannie, how awful." She hurried to defend her dear sister. "That v nces to your fault. They should not have had the draperies arranged so that so might trip over them. I say they owe you a very public apology."

else's Frannie emerged from her embarrassment with a lopsided grin. worked out. The woman's hideous son had been making unw of guilt advances all night. After I ruined his mother's ball, she kept him at b ght it to the determination of a very devoted herd dog."

once I Celia joined the girls in a fit of giggling, then sadly quieted once a renever only a bit of poorly hung drapery could solve all their problems. She what it shook her head. "I cannot imagine how I am going to seduce Lord Ra her. A will be utterly impossible."

"Nonsense!" Frannie gave her a stern scowl. "It's not as if he is re p or your and you are exceptional. Both our mothers said so—did they not, Soph

ut your "Absolutely." Sophie dramatically pressed the back of her hand pletely forehead, as if overcome by such exquisiteness. "A raven-haired beau : revealeyes as bewitching and rare as green sapphires."

. Mama "If either of you thinks this behavior is helpful—you are wrong.

ed you rli fted her chin and folded her arms tightly across her middle. “There n’t hateto seduction than looks.” A disgruntled huff escaped her. “Or so I hav the torntold. Even Mama somewhat suggested what you two propose. Altho phrased it as being nice to the man and playing to his ego.”

d teeth. Both Frannie and Sophie threw up their hands and cheered as thou mp andhad just won at whist.

“You can do this,” Frannie assured her.

“Most definitely,” Sophie agreed.

“Whether or not I can remains to be seen.” Celia returned to ma at about her poor, throbbing temples. “Please tell me the two of you plan to rei on you London for the Season?”

one of “Oh, absolutely.” Frannie turned and arched a brow at Sophie.

r gala.” “Certainly.” Sophie handed them each their teacups, refreshed the “Mama brandy, then held hers high for a toast. “To a successful Season of sut was the and seduction.”

f some “Success,” Frannie echoed wholeheartedly.

started “Success,” Celia said, feeling more doubt than enthusiasm.

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lifted her chin and folded her arms tightly across her middle. “There is more to seduction than looks.” A disgruntled huff escaped her. “Or so I have been told. Even Mama somewhat suggested what you two propose. Although she phrased it as being nice to the man and playing to his ego.”

Both Frannie and Sophie threw up their hands and cheered as though they had just won at whist.

“You can do this,” Frannie assured her.

“Most definitely,” Sophie agreed.

“Whether or not I can remains to be seen.” Celia returned to massaging her poor, throbbing temples. “Please tell me the two of you plan to remain in London for the Season?”

“Oh, absolutely.” Frannie turned and arched a brow at Sophie.

“Certainly.” Sophie handed them each their teacups, refreshed them with brandy, then held hers high for a toast. “To a successful Season of subterfuge and seduction.”

“Success,” Frannie echoed wholeheartedly.

“Success,” Celia said, feeling more doubt than enthusiasm.



## CHAPTER FOUR

THOMAS STUCK HIS head inside Elias's office. "Mr. Portney here to see my lord."

"Send him in." Elias set aside the Duchess of Hasterton's papers, rubbed his eyes, which were gritty and overtired from poring over the Hasterton files and trying to solve the mystery of their strange situation.

"Good day, my lord." Mr. Jack Portney, the Bow Street Runner Elias always consulted, approached the desk.

The unmistakably disappointed sag to the man's shoulders from the moment Elias asked, "I take it you found nothing on Miss Celia Bening?"

"Nothing, my lord." Jack removed his hat. "Some good news about the case though. At least there are no records of arrest." The man worried the hat slowly turning his topper in his hands. "The only information I have regarding a Bening was when Lady Thea Bening married Edmond Tufton, the fifth Duke of Hasterton. And of course, the report of the duke's death in that carriage accident while they were abroad." He tipped his head to the side and pursed his lips. "Lady Thea was the daughter of a German nobleman and an English mother whose father was a baronet. That would explain the lack of records on the Bening name here in London."

Elias rubbed the back of his neck, trying to work out the tension from this thoroughly frustrating matter. "Thank you, Jack. I know you did your best. He pulled a payment voucher out of his center desk drawer, filled it out, and gave it to the fellow. "Take this to James, and your strictest confidence is appreciated, as always."

"Thank you, my lord. I wish I could have found more." Jack took the voucher and offered a respectful tip of his head, then left the room.

Elias stared down at the dowager's folder while going back over the nuance of yesterday's meeting with her and the mysterious yet enticing Celia Bening. The two beauties had to be related. Such a remarkable resemblance would be an extreme rarity any other way.

He snorted with a soft laugh. Of course, they had neither denied nor confirmed a shared bloodline when he had asked. Miss Bening had accused him of impertinence.

He checked his timepiece, then scowled down at the newly drafted will and testament of the Duchess of Hasterton. All the documents were the lady's signature, those of the witnesses, and a seal. But he had to wait until he received a response from the solicitor in Germany or the duke himself. Unfortunately, that could take weeks—or, with the tendency to ignore his correspondence, forever.

Time to call upon the duchess and attempt to buy himself more time. He hated delaying because of her failing health, but felt duty-bound to protect his clients. Namely, the current duke and his sister.

Elias rose, tucked the pertinent paperwork into a protective sleeve, and placed the packet into his satchel. "Thomas!" he called while securing the bag's leather straps and buckles.

The young man popped in as though he was waiting on the other side of the door. "Yes, my lord?"

"A hackney, if you please."

"Right away, my lord."

Smiling to himself, Elias looked forward to another evening in confrontation with the inimitable Miss Bening. He tucked his satchel under his arm and hurried out to the waiting hackney. Upon arriving at the Hasterton townhouse, he again paid the driver to wait. After all, Miss Bening could very well have him tossed out on his ear when he tried his own

subterfuge to counter the many inconsistencies of the Hasterton household. The front door opened before he banged the lion's brass ring against the plate.

"Miss Bening is expecting you, my lord," Gransdon said with a flourish and a bow.

"Miss Bening and the dowager duchess?"

"No, my lord. Her Grace is not receiving today." The butler closed the front door and directed Elias down the hall to a room on the left. "Miss Bening requested you join her in the library."

"In the library?" Elias repeated, hoping to draw more information from the stoic servant before entering the delightfully ferocious feline's den.

"Alone?"

ied nor Gransdon's stony expression hardened even more. He came to a merely front of the partially opened door and held out his hand. "I presume you keep your bag on your person as before, my lord?"

wn last Elias handed over his hat and gloves. "You presume correctly, Gr needed Thank you."

ferred The butler offered another aloof yet respectful nod, then turned and the without a word.

duke's "Do come in, Lord Raines," Miss Bening called from within. "And the door open, if you would."

me. He "I am yours to command, Miss Bening." Elias entered cautiously *all* admiring the multiple levels of a room that could only be described as lover's heaven on earth. Shelves of tomes covered every wall from floor to ceiling, thence ceiling on the first level, and from what he could see of the second floor, the those walls held more of the same. At the far end of the room, a chesterfield crackled in a modest hearth framed by a pair of generously cushioned chairs, the side of perfect for reading.

Miss Bening rose from behind a large mahogany desk at the end of the room closest to him and offered not only a graceful curtsy but an unbearably beguiling smile to go along with it. She wore another deep green corset of joyable muslin that brought out her eyes, but this one was embroidered with a delicate pattern of ivy that accentuated her lovely curves—not that they needed accentuating. Her shapely form caught a man's eye and turned his thoughts to Bening all sorts of delicious, forbidden possibilities.

n bit of "A pleasure to see you again, my lord," she said in a sultry tone that would have had him swallow hard.

ainst its "Is it really?" He moved closer, unable to keep himself from glancing at her. "Yesterday, you wished to order me ousted."

proper "I did not." Her eyes flashed with the admirable defensiveness of her first meeting.

He couldn't help but chuckle. "Your eyes do not match your denial, Miss Bening."

. "Miss She coyly lowered her gaze while moving closer. "I must be forgiven, then, for an ill temper brought on by the weariness of my day. I am from She met his appreciative stare and treated him to a fetching smile that made his heart skip a beat. The tempting bow of her mouth appear even more kissable. "Might you be so good as to be possible to allow us to start our acquaintance over? Clear the slate."

halt in speak, and start anew?"

"You will" "Indeed." Elias sealed the tempting agreement with a polite nod, guard immediately sharpened. The leery yet fearless lioness of yesterday and today became a seductive minx, and the role did not suit her. He found the in her demeanor a bloody shame. He liked the green-eyed lioness and left. Perhaps he could coax the exciting feline back with a few well questions. "Might I ask after Her Grace? I fully expected to meet with her today."

Miss Bening's come-hither smile faltered. "Her Grace is resting peacefully, she will not be joining us."

"I was very sorry to learn about Her Grace's failing health." A floor to meant that sentiment. Whether a relative or merely a companion, it was a floor, than a little obvious that Miss Bening's fondness for the duchess ran deep. ery fire returned to leave. "I should call at another time. Please ask Her Grace to send me chairs for me when she feels well enough to receive company."

"Her Grace asked that I review the will. If I find it suitable, she will sign it for you. I will deliver it to her in her rooms, then return it to you when she usually signs." The wily minx subtly arched her back as though ensuring perfection offered the mouthwatering fullness of her perfect breasts at the best possible angle.

*Damn.* He could appreciate those breasts at any angle. Elias cleared his throat and forced his mind back to the matter at hand. "The document will also be witnessed, Miss Bening." Before she could counter his statement he added, "And please understand that I intend no rudeness, but a will is a personal matter. I insist on reviewing it with Her Grace. Alone." He softened the warning with a gentler tone. "After all, with you as the beneficiary, your review of the will would be most inappropriate."

He patted the satchel still tucked under his arm. "Besides, I fear I have to complete the document as Her Grace wished. I am waiting for an answer from the solicitor in Germany as well as a response from her son, the duke."

A transformation came over Miss Bening. She moved even closer, as though he had suddenly become her prey. His senses thrilled at the near travel. "the fearless lioness."

"Her Grace requested everything be finalized by today," she said. "Do you find any portion of that request unclear?" The lady glaring at him as though ready to unleash her fury mesmerized him to the point of silence. "I have

answer, my lord, so I might assist you in the resolution of any confusion but his. “The confusion, Miss Bening,” he said softly, moving to stand close enough to indulge in the sensual sweetness of her delicate jasmine scent. “Her Grace named you as her sole beneficiary and completely left her children. Especially her daughter—whom one might consider as the heir of the Bening accounts that were set aside in Her Grace’s contract with her. It is highly irregular, and I can almost guarantee that her court will challenge it.”

“I assure you Her Grace’s children are well set for the future.” She smiled, and her earlier coyness had disappeared. “And they will not find Elias will when the time comes.”

Elias was glad her sham of false coyness had dropped away. He kept nothing but the truth from this exquisite lady. “While I would like to send more than to take your assurances to heart, I fear I cannot.”

“And why is that?” Her chin jutted higher. She was ready to do anything to sign and he found it exhilarating.

“Because the duke, the dowager duchess, and Lady Cecilia are among her clients,” he said, “and you, Miss Bening, are not.”

She blinked faster, as though fighting back tears. In fact, the pale gleam in her eyes gleamed overly bright beneath the many candles lighting the room. Was the beauty frustrated at being thwarted from her riches, or was there something else? “Her Grace could very well die before you hear of it, in Germany,” she said. “Would you have her leave this world frustrated if her last requests were denied?”

The faint tremor in her voice took hold of his heart. It bespeaks of a beneficiary, protectiveness and sorrow for the dowager rather than a hunger for power and possessions. He lowered his gaze as she turned away to compose herself. She moved to a portion of the bookcase directly behind the desk.

“Might I offer you a glass of wine, my lord?” She spoke so quietly he wasn’t certain he had heard her correctly.

“I beg your pardon?” He stepped closer, took a stand between the two chairs in front of the desk, and set his satchel in one of them.

She still didn’t turn, merely stood taller, as though trying to remember her duties as a perfect hostess while recovering from her upset state. “Wine, my lord, ready said louder without facing him. “Would you care for some?”

“That would be most kind, thank you.” Elias found her unexpl-

on.” suffering most intolerable. “I can help you, Miss Bening, if only you would allow it. Please tell me how I might make things easier.”

ent, “is “I am quite capable of pouring two glasses of wine without aid from either you or a servant, but I thank you.” She turned from the liquor cabinet and reached into the shelves and offered him a glass. “I fear all we have at the moment is Madeira. The brandy has yet to be replenished. Shall I ring for children instead?” She attempted a smile and failed. “It would be no trouble,” she said with a great deal of difficulty as she stared downward and waited for he didn’t take the wineglass from her.

ight the He purposely took hold of the goblet so that his fingers covered her hand, a protective intimacy. The warm silkiness of her bare fingers stirred him more than he thought possible. “I can help you,” he repeated softly, “nothing need but tell me how.”

Their fingers still touching, she lifted her gaze and locked eyes with him for the span of several heartbeats, long enough to lift his hopes. Then she glanced downward again and released the glass, pulling her hand from his. “You can help me by fulfilling Her Grace’s request.” She primly clasped her hands in front of her waist. “It is of the utmost importance to me she should be green of overset or put upon during what I feel are most certainly her last days.’” She stepped into the room. “You love her as if she were your mother.” The observation came before he could stop it.

ir from She nodded while staring down at her untouched glass on the counter. “That her do,” she whispered. “I have known her all my life.”

“Then you must know the duke and Lady Cecilia as well.”

oke of She lifted her head and returned her chin to its stubborn angle. “I know them both quite well.”

herself. “Then you also must realize they will fight this will no matter what you believe at this moment.” He had no idea if the two would fight it or not. Yet he felt an irrational need to keep this lady talking in the hopes that she would accidentally reveal her troubles.

pair of Her smile turned bitter and defiant. “I can promise you, Lord Raines will not fight this will. There is no doubt regarding that.”

ain the “Celia! You did not tell me Lord Raines had arrived.” The duchess stood in the doorway, pale yet lovely in her morning walking dress of a cambric print with tiny yellow flowers and a matching Spanish muslin. Today, she carried a gleaming black cane, its golden

ou will decorated with inlays of colored glass. Even though she steadied herself with the stylish walking stick, she moved forward with the flawless grace of a swan gliding across a pond. “Lord Raines. So good of you to accede to my wishes for expediency regarding my documents.”

At this time Miss Bening cocked a brow and turned away with an almost gleeful expression, leaving him to his own devices. “Would you like some Madeira, Your Grace?” she asked the duchess.

“Madeira?” The dowager frowned. “Have you not ordered tea?” She glanced around as though suddenly realizing where she was. “And where are we? No one in the world would receive Lord Raines in the library? And alone?” Her face of loveliness puckered with a furious scowl. “We shall discuss this matter later. “You, Celia.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Miss Bening dutifully guided the duchess to the door. “But with you here now, I am no longer alone with Lord Raines, then I am in a most infamous rakehell, risking my reputation even with doors propped wide open and servants filling the halls. I shall order tea immediately.”

As Miss Bening left the room, the dowager eyed him. Her gaze became a cutting stare, as if she was sorting through his mind to find the thought he wanted. “You did not complete my will as I requested.”

Shocked at her astuteness, Elias flared his eyes wide despite his efforts to remain unreadable. There was naught to do now but bow his head and beg forgiveness. The lady might be unwell, but she was far from confused, or the least bit foggy-minded. “I did not complete it, Your Grace. However, everything is ready to proceed as soon as I receive a response from your solicitor in Germany—and your son.”

“And who, might I ask, instructed you to contact either of them?” His face that you glare became as cold as the Thames in the dead of winter.

“As solicitor over the Hasterton estate, it is my duty to protect the interests of all my clients. A last will and testament that fails to benefit you, namely the duke and Lady Cecilia, must be thoroughly investigated before it is finalized.”

“You do realize that correspondence from Germany could take weeks or even months?” She clutched the ornate handle of her cane with her petite hands, as if trying to control the urge to beat him with it. “I have no time for an unlicked cub whose sole contribution is to handle padding his self-importance by tattling to a vainglorious duke rather than to me.”



elf with acceding to a mere old woman's wishes. Complete the document or  
ce of a find another solicitor who will."

to my Elias realized his jaw had dropped, and promptly closed his mouth.  
was torn between begging for forgiveness or applauding the woman's  
eful air, impressive dressing-down she had just delivered. Perhaps the dowager  
is, Your healthier than she realized.

He bowed his head. "I am quite clear now on Your Grace's requirements.  
?" She and I do beg your pardon."

hy ever The duchess huffed and looked away, as if still too angry to tolerate  
?" Her sight of him.

er later, Miss Bening returned and motioned to the chair next to the duchess  
be seated, my lord. Grandson shall have the tea for us shortly."

a chair. With a sense of self-preservation solidly in place, Elias moved to sit  
ie most front of another chair that placed him well out of reach of the dowager's  
de open—just in case. He made a flourishing wave at the chair Miss Bening  
recommended. "After you, Miss Bening."

came a She appeared to be trying not to smile, but an amused twinkle  
ght she lovely eyes betrayed her. After a faintly mocking nod, she seated herself  
to the duchess. With them seated side by side, he could not ignore  
his best uncanny resemblance. After a pint too many one evening, Master F  
is head had once described the Duchess of Hasterton as an incomparable beauty  
ir from man was sorely mistaken. Miss Bening's loveliness demanded the  
Grace adoration.

se from "Your Grace, again, I do apologize for failing to finalize  
documents," Elias said. "As recompense, might I offer a rejuvenating  
?" Her through Hyde Park? My barouche can be readied at a moment's notice.  
believe you would find it quite comfortable on a day as glorious as  
ect the The open carriage would suit the duchess much better than a tiring  
it all of announce her presence in London. Such an outing would also buy him  
stigated time and offer yet another opportunity to become better acquainted with  
enchanted Miss Bening.

eks and The regal matron studied him as though plotting the most efficient  
ith both disposing of him after clubbing him senseless with her cane. She  
. "I am propped the fashionable walking stick against the arm of her chair.  
cern is folded her hands in her lap. "I fear I must beg off, since I have comm  
er than attending Lady Bournebridge's ball tomorrow evening." Her exp

I shall harden. "As I noted earlier, my health does not permit a crowded series of activities." With a sly glance Miss Bening's way, she smiled. "How do you not wish to hold Miss Bening prisoner in this stuffy house on weekdays? I would describe it as such a *glorious* day. If Lady Sophie or Lady Ardsmer were available to join her, she may go while I fortify myself for tomorrow's outing."

"Lady Sophie?" he repeated, not familiar with the name.

"Lady Sophie is the daughter of the Dowager Countess of Rydl. I would like to rate the Miss Bening explained. "And I believe you met Lady Ardsmer on a certain occasion. Your partner, Lord Parkerton, is her husband's solicitor."

"Do you?" "Yes, I have made Lady Ardsmer's acquaintance, but I have not had the pleasure of meeting Lord Ardsmer." Elias felt the fool for not standing in Lady Sophie—or at least not hearing about her in passing conversation. He prided himself on keeping an ear to the talk of the *ton* and staying informed about those in London for the Season. It was just good business to do so.

He offered Miss Bening a hopeful smile. "After tea, I would be delighted to travel in my own vehicle and coachman readied for an afternoon outing. Would that be acceptable to you, Miss Bening?"

"You have a barouche and employ a coachman, yet you travel from your lodgings to the office in a hackney?" Miss Bening arched a brow, challenging him to explain.

"Celia!" the duchess said. "Such rudeness is unacceptable."

Elias lifted a hand to bely the scolding. "Actually, it is a valid question, Your Grace. After all, I am in your employ, and you have the right to know everything about your solicitor."

The dowager huffed and kept a hard look trained on Miss Bening. "I shall be here today."

Gransdon entered the room and stepped aside, supervising the footmen following him. Each of them carried a large silver tray. One held a fine china tea set, the teapot, cups, and saucers decorated with pink roses centered between bands of deep blue bordered in gold. The

others bore matching plates and delightful platters of finger sandwiches and seedcakes.

"Shall I serve, Your Grace?" Gransdon asked.

"Thank you, no, Gransdon. Miss Bening will serve while Lord Ardsmer regales us with the story of his barouche and coachman." The duchess's acerbic tone left no doubt that she considered today a complete ar

chedule failure.

never, I “Very good, Your Grace.” Gransdon tipped a subtle nod that shoos that you footmen out ahead of him. He softly pulled the door almost closed but never latched it.

orrow’s Miss Bening moved to serve them, allowing Elias yet another opportunity to admire her beauty. Her delicate features were unspoiled by pots of rouge or powder. The gleaming lushness of her ebony braid pinned into a “shire,” chignon made him wonder what she would look like with her tresses a priori and tumbling down her back—or across his pillows.

“Well, Lord Raines?” she said as she poured. “Your amusing story yet had your barouche and coachman?”

nowing Elias laughed. “It is doubtful my story will amuse you. My brother’s invitation. He the coach to me upon my acceptance as partner at Parkerton, Hodge formed Kane. It was terribly difficult to enjoy the company of several gentlemen so. He whenever I drove through the park, so I employed a coachman.”

to have “Your brother?” Miss Bening left the question open-ended, but that he understood exactly what she asked.

“The Duke of Almsbury,” he said, adopting a feigned tone of warning. “Beware of him, Miss Bening. He is quite the scapegrace—but of course to him as to say that with all the affection my only brother is due.”

Miss Bening, the fearless lioness he was determined to know sooner or later, better, gifted him with an almost teasing smile. “And would he say that to you, of you, my lord?”

to know “Doubtful,” Elias said, and it wasn’t *quite* a lie. He couldn’t hold a candle to Monty’s escapades. And more importantly, he was not about to admit that he had no troubles when it came to finding a lady to warm his bed. The pair of them simply wasn’t brought up in polite company. “I was always the studious one. More into books than mischief.”

with pale The dowager used her cane to push herself to her feet and ambled to the other door. She opened it as wide as it would go, then turned and looked at them. “I am tired and do not possess the energy to pretend otherwise,” she said with an unsmiling focus centered on Miss Bening. “Enjoy your tea, enjoy the company, and leave this door as I have placed it.” She shifted her sharp-eyed stare to Raines. “I want that will ready for my signature before I depart for chess’s Bournebridge’s ball tomorrow evening. Are we quite clear on that?”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Knowing word would never arrive from Gerned both tomorrow, Elias reluctantly and silently admitted defeat on delay. He did not document’s finalization any longer. “I shall bring it for your sight tomorrow. You have my word.”

“Very good.” The duchess’s weary attention turned back to Miss Bening. “Door open. Understand?”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Miss Bening gave the woman a deep, respectful curtsy.

After a look of dubious approval, the dowager left them to their tea. “Should you help her reach her rooms?” Elias asked, keeping his head down.

Miss Bening jerked and stared at him as if she had forgotten he was there. “No, my lord. She prefers for her maid to attend to that when we are guests at home.”

Elias found the lady’s nervousness concerning—as if the two of them might just become bait for the duchess’s snare. He almost smiled. As a second he had never had to worry about a lady leg-shackling him by turning a compromising situation. He was safe from the Marriage Mart. The course, Ilioness’s unease had to be from something else. “Miss Bening, are you unwell?”

“I am not.” Her sharp gaze softened, turning almost thoughtful. “I am not. My blunt, but your concern about Her Grace surprised me.”

Elias found himself more than a little insulted. “Have you found any behavior wanting toward Her Grace or yourself? Have I been so rude to you that I am callous?”

Genuine remorse shone on the lady’s lovely face. With an apologetic nod of her head, she served him his tea. “Forgive me, my lord.” A hint of color played across the tempting suppleness of her lips. “You have been so impertinent and frustrating at times, but I have sensed no vicious intentions toward you.”

“And you never will.” Elias purposely touched her bare fingers as she accepted the cup and saucer. “My intentions are nothing but the best for you, Miss Bening.”

The half-smile that so delightfully plumped her cheeks returned. “Thank you, Lord. I fear you may overwhelm me.”

The sarcasm in her voice made him chuckle. “I doubt very much

any by anything could overwhelm you, my lady.”

ing the “Miss Bening,” she gently corrected him, then glanced at the open nature “Or Celia, when we find ourselves indulged with a bit of loosely chaperoned privacy, as we are now.”

Bening. “Celia,” he repeated. Her name tasted sweet, and he knew without doubt that she would taste even sweeter. “Please call me Elias.”

spectful “Elias,” she repeated, thrilling him to no end. “A form of Elias means *the Lord is my God*.” She seated herself, took a sip of her tea,

l. smiled. “Lady Sophie and Lady Ardsmere are staying here with us. I assure you you would survive Lady Sophie on a carriage ride much easier than Lady Ardsmere.” Her glance at him over the rim of her teacup was filled with mirth. “You will like her.”

here at “I like you, Celia,” he said, then blazed ahead as though such honesty was entirely appropriate. “You are as intoxicating as the finest of wines.” At her slightly shocked reaction, he attempted to reassure her and son, not a buck of the first head. “Please take no insult, Celia, for I mean no insult. As a second son, I am rarely fortunate enough to meet such an admirable woman who is more fitting to my station than that of my brother, the duke.” As he said the words, he regretted them, because she stiffened and then turned cold. Damn his foolish tongue!

Forgive “Ah, yes. More fitting,” she repeated. “Heaven forbid I should consider myself worthy of a duke’s status.”

and my “Again, Celia. I meant no insult. Please know that.”

ly cold Her jaw tightened, and her mouth went hard. “I am not insulted by my lord. I am insulted by...circumstances.”

getic tip “Elias.” Although he knew it to be forward, he reached across the table, a smile between them and barely touched the back of her bare hand. So soft. So warm. So in need of his protection and care. “You are an intriguing woman, and I wish us to be—”

gain aseyed gaze enchanted him, making him willing to promise her anything he could. “What do you wish for us, Celia? Tell me.”

‘Do not “Everything.” It was the only word he could intelligently form at that moment.

ch that “Perhaps you should fetch your barouche, while I fetch Lady S

Celia rose and stepped away from him, making him hunger for her more. After a graceful curtsy and a knowing smile, she left him there in the middle of the library, staring after her.

Suddenly, he recognized the clever snare he had earlier sensed. A doubt-dwager didn't fear leaving Celia in his company because she knew what his fellow solicitors and the *ton* would think if he formed a slight but convenient attachment to the beneficiary of her will—the will he had made for the duchess.

“Damn,” he said under his breath. The lady had effortlessly boxed him into a corner. He snorted and rolled his shoulders the same way he did with training at No. 13 Bond Street with Gentleman Jackson to box away his frustrations. “Do not count your winnings yet, Your Grace,” he had bluntly warned as he stepped into the hall and looked up and down it for Grandmaster to recover his hat and gloves. “I am a worthy opponent.”

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## CHAPTER FIVE

“YOU CERTAINLY ARE playing the part of modest companion.”

perched on the chair in front of the dressing table, eyeing Celia as she put on her plainest bonnet, selected a pair of gloves, then retrieved an umbrella, parasol and modest reticule. “You are not even going to change your dress?”

“I am not.” Celia glanced down at her favorite ivy-embroidered dress that had quite successfully caught Lord Raines’s—no, not Lord Raines, Elias’s—eye during tea. She smiled at the memory and grudgingly realized that perhaps he wasn’t such an odious gentleman after all. In fact, she liked him. Probably much more than she should.

She gave a teasing wiggle of her shoulders. “The man seems to appreciate my appearance well enough earlier. Why should he not continue to do so now?”

Sophie rose and circled Celia. “I suppose you are right. The trail of gossip does guide the eye to the qualities a man admires most. Or at least, so it is said.” She interrupted herself with a wicked giggle. “Are you certain that I wouldn’t be a more appropriate chaperone? After all, she is positively a married woman.”

“Frannie and her mother have an appointment with their favorite man today. The woman is highly sought after. I would hate to cause them to miss this opportunity while they are in London.”

“I see.” Sophie went to the window overlooking the street and peered at the sheer panels of lace hanging between the draperies. “My, my, and what a barouche Lord Raines has.”

“He is here already?” Celia shoved in and had a look for her coachman stood beside the carriage’s black horses. The beasts shone with a pair of highly polished onyx jewels, making them perfectly suited to the stylish barouche. It was painted a gleaming black with gold detailing, and the folds of its retracted top shone in the sun like the finest satin. “Lord Raines and his brother must be quite close to warrant such a gift.”

“According to my contacts,” Sophie said, “he and the duke are



remains of their family. Much like me and Maman.”

“Like all of us,” Celia said while still peeping out the window, swallowed hard against the sudden knot of dread tightening her throat. “If she would have no one. An emotionally charged huff escaped her. Of course, if Mama got her wish and married her off before losing the battle with her illness...”

Celia dismissed that idea with a determined hiss. That particular Sophie would not come true. She refused to marry for anything other than what her mother had done. Mama had never hidden the fact that her union with Father had been more than a friendly business arrangement, so he might secure an heiress? she might improve her family’s social standing. Mama had loved her husband—Hodgely—and lost him by doing what her family wanted rather than what she heart desired.

“Stop huffing and hissing. You sound like a stray cat spoiling for a fight,” Sophie plucked a fresh sprig of greenery from her own bonnet and set it on Celia’s. “For luck, dear sister. And it matches your dress.”

“I fear I shall need it.” Celia fidgeted with her gloves. She had to have them things but couldn’t be seen on an outing without them. Determined to improve her own mood, she twitched her nose at Sophie, then winked. “I have did ask me to call him Elias rather than *my lord*.”

“Very impressive.” Sophie rewarded her with a proud smile, then turned to her. “You did nothing improper to make such progress with the hair. Lord Raines, did you?”

Celia dramatically fanned herself. “I allowed him to touch my hair when I handed him a glass of wine, and then later, I let him touch the my bare hand.”

“Celia!” Sophie attempted to appear shocked before giving in to a fine snorting giggles.

A knock at the door interrupted them. “Lady Sophie? Miss Benington is here. A new maid called without opening the door. “Mr. Grandsden is here. Lord Raines has arrived with his carriage.”

Sophie rocked an auburn brow to an inquisitive height. “Are we ready to go?” A sudden excited fluttering in Celia’s middle caught her off guard. “Heaven’s sake, how ridiculous. She cleared her throat and swallowed. “I will dispel the unreasonable feeling but failed. The finger sandwich she had after leaving Lord Raines in the library must not have sat well. “I su

am as ready as I shall ever be.”

w. She “You’ve gone quite pink in the cheeks, and I know you never go t. Soon, pot of rouge. Are you all right? Shall I send him away?” With a cor course, frown, Sophie removed her glove and pressed the backs of her fin with the Celia’s forehead. “You don’t appear to be overly warm.”

“No,” Celia said, inwardly chiding herself. “I appear to be overly ar wish She led the way out into the hall and paused at her mother’s door. n love. inside revealed Berta in the small sitting room quietly mending. Th nothing looked up and pressed a finger to her lips, then offered a sad smile air, and nodded, closed the door, and continued on.

Master “Her Grace is sleeping?” Sophie whispered.

What her “Yes.” Celia left it at that. To speak of it in any more depth would her to tears and foil an opportunity to further seduce the rakishly han fight.” yet entirely too curious, Lord Raines. As she descended the stairs, a j cured it guilt about toying with the genuinely nice man not only surprised her l her stomach fluttering even more. She pressed a hand to her midc ted the silently ordered it to stop. It had to be those few bites of sandwich o ined to her such unusual distress. The meat paste must have surely turned. She ed. “He speak to Mrs. Harcourt after the outing.

Lord Raines—*Elias*, she gently reminded herself—waited in th nudged watching her as she traipsed down the stairs. The man possessed s ndsome irresistible smile, with the faintest dimple in his left cheek. How had noticed it before? Probably because she found the rest of him fingers irresistible and breathtaking, even though she shouldn’t. The stylis back of curls of his thick, dark hair were as sleek as the golden-eyed panther t entranced her at the menagerie. He held his hat curled in the crook of h a fit of looking as relaxed as could be.

The finger sandwiches in her middle twirled at an alarming rate, g?” one her catch her breath.

on says “Steady, Celia,” Sophie warned from behind her. “Do not in yourself too deeply in the game.”

ady?” Celia smiled and held her head higher. Sophie was right. The first rd. For subterfuge: do not embrace the act so tightly as to trick yourse hard to believing it is real. “Thank you, dear sister,” she said for Sophie’s ears d eaten

“We have a glorious day to enjoy, ladies.” Elias bowed to them ppose I joined him in the hall.

That he persisted in bowing to her rather than offering a polite tip of his hat near ahead concerned Celia, but she feared reminding him would make him concerned the Hasterton household even closer. She chose to ignore it for now. When she turned to her ally. “Lady Sophie Redwell, allow me to present Lord Raines.”

“Not silly.” Sophie maintained a knowing half-smile as she curtsied. “My lord. A peek at Elias bowed again. “Lady Sophie.” He made a sweeping gesture towards the front door as the butler swung it open. “To the carriage, dear ladies. Celia Park awaits.”

Celia and Sophie led the way. The coachman opened the carriage door and offered his hand to steady them as they climbed in and took their seats. Celia sat facing front and assumed Sophie would sit beside her with Elizabeth, the seat behind the driver, facing them. When Sophie made herself comfortable on the seat behind the driver, Celia cleared her throat and looked out with her eyes as wide as she could. Sophie shot back a smile and shook her head and wiggling like a hen settling into a comfortable nest.

causing Before Celia could move to the spot beside Sophie, Elias climbed in and would sit beside her. He nodded to the driver, then leaned back and smiled at both. “My brother will be beside himself when I tell him of the outing to the hall, missed today.”

such an “I suppose you could have invited him.” Celia opened her parasol for some protective shade. “After all, Lady Sophie is as yet unattached and just as dear a friend deserved that warning shot after creating such an intimate arrangement, short of marriage.”

what had “And soon to return to France,” Sophie reminded her, with a slight narrowing of her lovely brown eyes. She opened her frilly-edged parasol and twirled it as if to say, *En garde, sister*.

making “I am a selfish man.” Elias unleashed the smile that made Celia’s stomach indigestion flutter at an alarming speed. “An afternoon outing with my dinner but two lovely ladies is something I refuse to share.”

“You are too kind, my lord.” Sophie pulled a small fan from her pocket and slowly twirled it in her right hand, signaling she loved another. Elias turned as if about to say something else to Celia, then paused alone. He seemed concerned. “Forgive me for such a personal inquiry, but are you as warm, Miss Bening?”

Good heavens. No, she was not warm. Well, yes, she was, but

of his because of the weather. It was the muscular length of his long study occasionally pressing against hers whenever the carriage swayed. She instead, not allow him to win at this game. Her cheeks must be red again. The third Lord Elias of her skin was indeed a curse in times such as these.

"I'm not overly warm at all, my lord. The ride is exhilarating, and my fair skin betrays my excitement about the outing." She retrieved a handkerchief toward from her reticule and opened it wide, daring him to read the subtle signals. *Hyde wait for me.*

"I see," he said, then looked away as if to disguise subtly shifting the carriage door closer.

in their seats. Sophie's eyes danced with mirth above the edge of her fan that fell from her hand. Lord Elias hid her soft snort of laughter. She coughed to explain away the sound. "If quite me, I seem to have choked on something."

She flared. "Take care, Sophie," Celia said while inwardly scolding herself for her head, mercy. She had to regain control and be done with all this silliness. The

nearness felt very nice, but that was no reason to behave like a child in an inn.

at them As they turned into Hyde Park, he leaned closer still, then feigning an expression of mild shock. "I beg your pardon for crowding you, Miss Darcy."

Do forgive me." But he made no effort to move and place more space between them.

and her Two could up the stakes of this game as long as they did so out of sight of the others enjoying the park. Safely hidden by the sides of the carriage,

he reached over and boldly patted his knee. "You, Lord Raines, appear a slight believe it is easier to ask forgiveness than permission."

sol and His smile captivated her, but not nearly so soundly as his eyes—intentions turning them an even sultrier shade of golden brown. "It is

strange to ask forgiveness," he said, locking his gaze with hers. "Do you not ask for one?" "In some cases," she brazenly answered.

"Lady Bournebridge and her poisonous pair approach, *mon amie.*" The footman reticuled tipped a nod to bring Celia's attention to the spiteful marchioness and her like-minded ladies accompanying her.

sed and Celia adjusted the tilt of her parasol to shield herself from the direct rays of the sun. She avoided their stares as they passed. But that didn't prevent the judgmental glances

from turning in their seats and craning their necks to peer at them. "Ah, but not ruling triumvirate of gossip," Celia said. "According to Duchess Theodora,

ng leg Bournebridge never steps out her door without Lady Essendon and she could hardly be in tow.”

fairness “Pleasant day to you, ladies,” Elias called out to the three with a pop of his hat. While still smiling, he lowered his voice for Celia and Sophie. “I fear pleasure alone. “Both the marchionesses and the countess are clients of her fan. Or rather, their husbands are.” He chuckled, a warm, friendly sound that signaled a far-too-enjoyable shiver through Celia. “Or they were,” he added with a smile. “We shall see if I hear from them about today. I have recently discovered that if the wives of my clients are unhappy, then so am I.”

“Oh, I am sure they will remain your clients,” Celia teased. “After my understanding that this Season is the debut for each of their daughters. “Dear mama also told their presentation at court did not go as well as they had hoped.”

“As a second son, I am quite safe,” Elias said with a grin.

without “But your brother is not,” Sophie reminded him before Celia could

Yes, his “Yes, and they will not wish to upset your brother by severing ties completely.” It was Celia’s turn to appear smug. “You should at least continue

to have the pleasure of their patronage until your brother either marries or is banished from London to escape the Marriage Mart.”

Bening. Elias grimaced as if suddenly tasting something very tart. “Lovely.”

space Celia laughed, and poor Sophie snorted her amusement and didn’t dare to cover it this time with coughing.

view of “I believe you two ladies can be quite wicked,” Elias teased.

age, she That made them laugh again, so much so that they both, for propriety’s sake, hid behind their fans.

“This is such fun,” Celia said, meaning it more than he would ever understand. “Thank you so much for suggesting it.” She hadn’t felt this energized and carefree in—well, ever. The realization sobered her and trounced the desire to revel in the enjoyment further. The stark realization that this situation was a genuine hit her. Nor could she hope for it to last.

Sophie “Celia?” Concern echoed in Elias’s deep voice as he gently tipped the two shields of her fan away from her face.

“Miss Bening,” she corrected him with a pointed glance in Sophie’s direction. “We are not close enough for anything else, my lord.”

all three He reacted with a somewhat injured demeanor. “Of course, Miss Bening. I should forgive me.”

and Lady Sophie scowled at her, leaned forward as though to say something.

and Lady apparently, thought better of it and sat back. "It is a lovely day and a lovelier ride, Lord Raines," she said without taking her narrow-eyed polite tip from Celia. "A much-needed escape from the sadness of Sophie's overshadowing Hasterton House."

of mine. Elias's injured demeanor immediately disappeared, replaced with that sent earlier concern. He boldly took Celia's fan, placed it on the seat beside him, then took her hands in his. "There is no shame in seeking a brief respite quickly from trials in order to better survive them."

She fought against sinking into his golden-eyed gaze. This was not all, it was supposed to be. It was she who should ensnare him. Not the other hunters. Far around. "You do not know," she started to explain, then went silent, struggling for composure. "You cannot possibly understand." And she never explain it to him.

He held her hands tighter and leaned in so close she could almost feel his breath on her face. And she realized she wanted to—so very badly.

"Make me understand, Celia," he said as though the park held no secrets for him. "Help me help you."

Sophie snapped her fan and broke the spell. "The poisonous trio is back once again, my dears. I highly recommend a more appropriate plan of action. Especially since Celia is to accompany Her Grace to Lady Bourne's ball."

Celia reluctantly pulled her hands free, picked up her fan, and once again sought refuge behind it. She turned her face away from Elias and made an effort of fixing her gaze on anything but him, even going so far as to slip her parasol so it almost separated them.

As Sophie had warned, the ladies whom the *ton* hated—but hung on to every word—slowly passed, returning from their earlier direction. They were not vicious women graced them with aloof smiles and regal nods. Celia remembered Mama describing how much she had detested the Bournebridge and her loyal followers, who had debuted the same as those of the Sisterhood and been just as unpleasant then as now. She said so aloud but caught herself before it was too late. Her near-slip jolted her to an almost painful awareness of how precarious life had become—a lonely.

"Celia!" Sophie hissed sharply. Celia met her trusted friend's gaze and knew Sophie understood :

an even nearly toppled the game.

and glare Elias gave the side of the carriage a hard thump, then turned to her. His dark brows drew together over his entirely-too-perceptive eyes. “Forgive me, Miss Bening, but you are causing me great concern.”

With his The coachman eased the vehicle over to one side of the path and stopped between before turning to face him. “Yes, m’lord?”

In respite “Return us to Hasterton House, Jamison.” Elias continued studying her with a scrutiny that made her shift uncomfortably. “I fear the sun has become a bit too strong for the ladies.”

Her way “No,” Celia countered, determined to regain control and rise above her quiet emotions. “Please do not cut this delight short because of my silliness. Could we find a shady place to sit or stroll for a while? After all,” she said with what she hoped was a convincing smile, “I have a ball to attend to tonight and must have fodder for Her Grace to share with the other ladies.”

The driver shifted his focus back to Elias and waited.

One in it Elias studied her a moment longer, then agreed. “As the lady wishes, there’s a fair bit of shade by the lake,” Jamison said before putting the carriage back in motion. “Should be nice walking there, if you don’t mind.”

Mr. Ridge’s “I would love a closer look at the Serpentine,” Celia said. “Her Grace says it is quite lovely this time of year with springtime’s awakening.”

He again “So be it.” Elias gave a tip of his head, and the carriage smoothly moved on toward a point on the lake.

He shifted her Sophie relaxed back in the seat and offered Celia a subtle nod of approval.

On their “I do hope we see some bugs or frogs.” Celia tucked her fan back into her reticule, looking forward to the easily managed distractions a walk beside the lake promised. “Dragonflies especially. They are my favorite. So glad to see you with their shimmering wings that put stained-glass windows to shame.”

Year as Elias eyed her as though she had sprouted a second head. “You like dragonflies almost as much as frogs?” He shifted in the seat and continued looking at her with an incredulous stare. “Might I ask how you feel about snakes?”

And how “Venomous or benign?”

“Venomous,” he said as though issuing a dare.

She sat taller, stretching to see if the lake’s conditions would be conducive to frogs, bugs, and, with any luck, dragonflies, although it was a bit of a stretch.

yet be too early in the season. "I treat adders and vipers with the same respect, of course, but I do enjoy watching grass snakes when I have the chance to find them in the garden."

"You are an amazing woman, Miss Bening." Elias slowly shook his head. "Why? Because I enjoy studying something other than embroidery?" She softened her sarcasm with a coy smile. "The world outside my parlour is full of many wonders waiting to be discovered. I need only become a head and look around." She closed her parasol and tucked it into the carriage beside the seat. With all the lovely shade, she wouldn't need it and she didn't want to be bothered with carrying it.

Elias opened his mouth to comment, but the carriage rolled to a stop and interrupted him. Jamison unlatched the carriage door, then moved to help the horses. After alighting with a nimble hop, Elias turned and helped Sophie step to the ground. As he turned and offered his hand to Celia, she gave her a look that made her catch her breath.

"Your world and its wonders await to be discovered, Miss Bening," he said for her alone, leaving Celia with the distinct impression that he was referring to bugs.

Determined to snare him just as effectively as he was ensnaring her, Grace leaned in closer than necessary and held tightly to his hand while she stepped down from the carriage. "I am ready to discover everything," she said softly, then remembered to tease the tip of her tongue across her lips. Frannie had recommended. For what reason, neither of them knew, but Frannie had found in her mother's bedside table drawer a forbidden novel Frannie had recommended it. Unfortunately, they could not read it in its entirety before Frannie had to put it back before her mother discovered it was missing. Elias's jaw flexed, and he held her hand even tighter though she stood quite solidly on the ground. "I fear..." he said quietly, then his words trailed off as he slowly stroked his thumb back and forth across the back of her gloved hand.

"You fear what, Lord Raines?" she asked just as quietly.

His eyes narrowed and his smile became more self-assured. "I fear I might play a dangerous game, Celia. Take care."

"Miss Bening," she gently corrected him, while easing her hand from his. She cast a teasing glance back at him, then hurried to join Sophie. "Indeed." He proffered a most gentlemanly nod. "Miss Bening."



utmost “Admirable recovery,” Sophie whispered to Celia before Elias fell open tobeside them.

Celia thanked her with a smile, then turned her attention to the mi s head. surface of the lake, which was only disturbed by a pair of regal swans roidery across it. “They are so lovely—and peaceful.”

side my “And devoted to one another,” Elias said. “They mate for life.”

lift my “Oh, to be a swan.” Celia ambled along the waterside, her gaze f : cornerthe snowy-white birds.

I didn’t Elias strolled next to her while Sophie diplomatically slowed an few steps behind, feigning interest in the fluffy band of clouds floati top andabove the tree line.

tend to “So, you do wish to marry someday?” Elias asked.

d Lady Celia didn’t answer right away. It was essential she word her re elia, hecarefully.

“Miss Bening?” he prompted, seeming impatient to hear her reply.

ng,” he “Only for love,” she finally said. “I will not subject myself to a un was *notis* more of a business arrangement for breeding an heir or climbing So fickle ladder. Marriage should be a true joining of two loving souls.”

r, Celiahe could comment, she hastily added, “Of course, as a gentle-born wo teppingno title, I need not worry about becoming a sought-after item at the pe l just asbreeding market.” She shifted her gaze from the swans to him. “Wha

: lip asyou, Lord Raines? As a second son of a duke and a renowned solicitor but thealready a partner in his firm, will you marry for prestige and riv er hadcontinue your elevation in Polite Society, or will you marry for love?”

because “You insult me, Miss Bening. Do you truly think me so avaricious’

. She tossed a shrug his way. “I simply state the obvious. Gentleme he nowsecond sons, are trained from birth that it is quite acceptable to do wha s wordstakes to make one’s mark in this world. Gain land, riches, and prestig

back offixed him with a look that dared him to deny it. “Tell me your fatl mother taught you to marry for love, and I shall heartily beg your pard

“My mother died when I was born, and my father hated me for it l ear youhe already had his heir. So, I fear I can neither deny nor confirm the p guidance you suggest.”

l out of Celia came to a halt, ashamed for allowing a lifetime of bitter convict Elias of heartlessness when he had given her no reason to bel was such a man. Staring down at the tips of her shoes, she fisted he

in step against her middle. "I do beg your pardon, Lord Raines. I should not have spoken in such a cruel manner. I am sorry. Truly. I completely understand how you wish to return me to Hasterton House and be done with my company as quickly as possible." She bowed her head and turned to walk away, but he caught her by the wrist, pulling her back to face him. "Do not walk away from me like this. I have questions that need to be answered. You owe me an explanation. I am not going to let you go until you give it to me. Do you understand?"

"I do not wish to be done with your company, my dearest Celia. I have never wanted to leave you. Ever." He blew out a heavy sigh while turning to stare at the lake as if he was looking for the answers he sought. "That is the dilemma with which I struggle." He turned back to her once more, squinting as though in pain. "And I beg that you call me home and fall in love with me again with Lady Sophie present. I long to hear you say my name as if you were still my wife. I long to hear you say that you are still my wife and that you are still enjoying just you enjoy being with me as much as I enjoy being with you."

He glanced back at Sophie where she dawdled a few steps behind her. Then he turned and faced Celia once more with a look that made her catch her breath. "Do you care for me, Celia Bening? The truth, if you please. Who are you to the Duke of Hasterton to make her care for you so much that she omitted her other children from her will? Do you not understand that the Duke of Hasterton will not stand for it? The man is ruthless about his vast holdings, and the courtiers are certain that Lady Cecilia will join him in the courts—especially since she is the one who has the money. Before she transfers from the Hasterton accounts to those of the Bening family, she will become more frequent of late. The duke has no idea what the duke's intentions are, but I know he will not allow it. Tell me, Celia. Tell me the truth. Tell me about yourself, so I might spare you the pain and protect you from what is ahead."

She looked at him with heart-wrenching disappointment and a healthy portion of fear regarding the guilt and shame she had felt for her earlier poor choice of husband. "I do not know what to say, Lord Raines. I am sorry. Truly. I completely understand how you wish to return me to Hasterton House and be done with my company as quickly as possible." She bowed her head and turned to walk away, but he caught her by the wrist, pulling her back to face him. "Do not walk away from me like this. I have questions that need to be answered. You owe me an explanation. I am not going to let you go until you give it to me. Do you understand?"

"Celia!" Sophie called out as she hurried to catch her. "Celia! What is wrong?"

"Miss Bening!" Elias rounded on them both and blocked the way. "What is going on?"

"I have heard quite enough from you, Lord Raines. You will return me to Hasterton House immediately." Celia had underestimated the man's madness. She was foolish enough to allow his mesmerizing smile and winning charm to lead her. That would not happen again.

"I meant no insult, and even you should agree that my question is a fair one."

ot have valid.” The caring in his eyes made her want to slap him and then stand in his arms and weep for what she could never have. “I can help you in any way I can. Please—let me.”

“The only help I require from you, Lord Raines, is transport to the house. Not Hasterton House. Now.” She drew herself up and clenched her teeth, but it held her composure to remain intact.

He bowed his head and slowly shook it, his mouth tight as the Duke Elias clenched his teeth too.

“The carriage, Lord Raines,” Sophie repeated while hugging Celia around Celia.

Elias curled his finger and thumb to his mouth and blew a sharp whistle. “Who that split the air. In an instant, the stylish barouche and its fine pair of horses came to a stop in front of them.

Too irritated and embarrassed with herself to worry about the convention, Celia yanked open the door before the coachman or Elias could reach it. She clambered up into the vehicle, took her seat, and snapped open her parasol. “Sophie, you will seat yourself beside me, please.”

“Of course.” Sophie slid into the seat beside her and squeezed her hand in a silent message of sympathy.

“Take them to Hasterton House,” Elias ordered the coachman.

“Then return for you, m’lord?” Jamison asked.

When he didn’t answer, Celia peeped out from behind her parasol to see why. Her heart ached at the sight of Elias disappearing into the woods.

“Seduction is for naught,” she said as the carriage took off at a brisk pace. “The hound only wishes to kill the fox.”

“You underestimate yourself, sister.” Sophie lightly squeezed her hand. “I believe he cares and is trying to protect you.”

Celia blinked faster against the infuriating tears that refused to go away.

“I will protect myself and Mama. Like always.”

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valid.” The caring in his eyes made her want to slap him and then throw herself in his arms and weep for what she could never have. “I can help you, Celia. Please—let me.”

“The only help I require from you, Lord Raines, is transport back to Hasterton House. Now.” She drew herself up and clenched her teeth, forcing her composure to remain intact.

He bowed his head and slowly shook it, his mouth tight as though he clenched his teeth too.

“The carriage, Lord Raines,” Sophie repeated while hugging an arm around Celia.

Elias curled his finger and thumb to his mouth and blew a sharp whistle that split the air. In an instant, the stylish barouche and its fine pair of black horses came to a stop in front of them.

Too irritated and embarrassed with herself to worry about social convention, Celia yanked open the door before the coachman or Elias could reach it. She clambered up into the vehicle, took her seat, and snapped open her parasol. “Sophie, you will seat yourself beside me, please.”

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## CHAPTER SIX

“MR. ELKIN STRONGLY recommended I tread lightly regarding the Duchess of Hasterton and her companion, my lord.”

Elias eyed Jack, knowing the Bow Street Runner had never backed from an investigation in all the years he had known him. “Did Mr. Elkin threaten your position if you continued looking into this matter for me?”

“He made it clear things would not go well for me if I caused the lady any trouble.” Jack ambled closer to the desk and gave an emphatic dip of his head. “He spoke as if she was his friend—or had once been more. I’ve seldom looked in a man’s eyes before.”

“As have I.” Elias remembered Master Hodgely’s fondness for the dowager. Apparently, in her youth, the lady had gained several admirers. Much as he had come to *admire* Celia and yearned to protect her, he appreciated the information about the duke’s background.” He handed the man another voucher, doubling the payment this time. “Let it rest for now, Mr. Elkin. Keep the duke off the scent and keep your post intact. You have a wife and children to feed, and I do not want your loss of wages on my conscience.”

“I can still keep an ear to the ground without old Elkin knowing. I’ll do my best, my lord. More, you’ll know.” Jack bobbed his head. “Good day to you, my lord.”

“Good day, Jack.” Elias watched the man leave, then leaned back in his chair and thought over what the Bow Street Runner had reported about the duke. Nothing new, really. Elias was already aware that not a soul in London could remember meeting the man. They all recalled his father, the fifth Duke of Hasterton, but the sixth was only known by his signature and his astoundingly lucrative trading at the Stock Exchange by a representative who refused to speak to anyone. The duke had to have made that man a Croesus to secure such loyalty. The duke was also known as a ruthless businessman. *Ruthless*. Was the man cruel, also? Was he the one who caused the fear and leeriness in Celia’s eyes? Elias’s blood boiled at the thought of anyone mistreating her. Renewed determination to protect her surged through him.

him.

He thought back over every conversation with her, scrutinizing every word. Not once had Celia ever exhibited any apprehension about the duke or commented about Lady Cecilia, other than mentioning the lady's poor health. And she had spoken as if she knew them both intimately.

A dangerous feeling of something much stronger than mere loyalty stirred within his heart. He cared about Celia and wanted her to live, but the dowager's relentlessness he'd never known. A need to protect the wondrous green-eyed goddess became stronger every day.

A heavy sigh escaped him. He had most assuredly estranged her from the park because of his determination to shield her from what would surely be a very public stripping away of everything the Duchess of Hasterton had left to her. If Celia would just trust him, he could save her from this scandalous humiliation.

"Blast and damn it all!"

A rap on the door and a curt "Carriage here, m'lord" interrupted his fuming. He pulled his watch from his pocket and glanced at it even though he knew the time. It couldn't be helped. He had waited as late as he dared to get the documents he had promised would be ready for her signature today.

He grabbed his leather bag and left the office without a word to the children. The closer the hackney drew to Hasterton House, the harder his heart churned. Not because of the duchess, but because of Celia. He refused himself in the seat, tensed to spring from the hackney as soon as it stopped. Why should he dread a visit? He probably wouldn't even see her, because she surely hated him by now. She probably thought he had arranged the meeting in the Hyde Park to interrogate her when her guard was down.

When he arrived, he paid the fare and bade the driver to wait. A hush Duke's servants could witness the signing of the copies of the will. Completing his documentation would not take long at all. He vaulted up the front steps and banged the brass ring in the lion's mouth against the plate.

After a surprisingly long few moments, Gransdon opened the door ruthlessly. "Welcome, my lord. Her Grace requests you see her in the privacy of the rooms. Please follow me."

A strange request, since the dowager had said she would attend through Bournebridge's ball this evening. Surely, the lady didn't mean to ha

bring the papers to her while she dressed. Bracing himself for what every-  
one awaited, Elias dutifully followed, all the while hoping to glimpse his  
duke—Celia, even though he knew she hated him.

Gransdon lightly knocked on a door at the head of the stairs, opened  
it and announced, “Lord Raines is here, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, Gransdon,” came the weak reply.

Only then did the butler step aside and allow Elias to enter.

Duchess Thea reclined on a lounge placed beside a wall of windows.

While her color seemed much improved, she appeared weaker and so  
much smaller in her plush nest of pillows and throws.

“Your Grace.” Elias offered a respectful bow.

She fluttered her fingers at a nearby chair. “Pull it closer and have  
such a Lord Raines, so we might review the document together. I have no  
manners or the rules of etiquette today.” She pulled in a slow, deep breath  
and behaved as though the effort exhausted her. “Forgive me. This afternoon  
has been particularly trying.”

“Think nothing of it, Your Grace.” Elias moved the chair as close  
as he could and had a seat. It pained him to see the lady becoming even  
more fragile. He pulled the document from his bag and held it so she could  
read without expending the effort to hold it.

“Next page,” she said repeatedly until they reached the last sheet.  
She frowned and squinted at the text. “I do not recall requesting what is  
settled in item twenty-one, section c.”

“Do you wish me to strike it from the copies?” He prayed she would  
use her but refused to dishonor her by arguing his point.

She closed her eyes. “No. I am grateful you thought to include it to  
better protect her.”

“There are three copies to sign in front of witnesses, Your Grace.”

She winced without opening her eyes.

“Gransdon and your lady’s maid can serve as witnesses, then  
attach the seal, and leave a copy here with you.” He glanced up at the  
door and the maid. They both nodded.

“And the other two copies?” she said, barely opening an eye and  
glared at him with a hawkish glare.

“One will be sent to your solicitor in Germany, and the other will  
remain at my office in case of any issues in the future.” He would not mention

Whatever children contesting the will. Upsetting the lady now would be reprehensible. She smiled and slowly opened both eyes. "Celia can handle them fierce."

It was his turn to smile. "She is indeed, Your Grace."

The duchess turned her head and studied him closer, her expression unnerving. "I charge you with protecting my Celia, Lord Raines."

"I beg your pardon?" The back of his neck tingled, and the hairs on his nape stood on end.

She arched a sleek brow and gave him a chiding glare. "I spoke clearly, but I shall repeat it, since I want no misunderstandings between us."

She paused and glanced at Gransdon and her maid. She waited for them to take a seat, that they would witness her words before returning her attention to him. "I charge you with protecting Celia Bening, Lord Elias Raines. Do you swear to honor this dying woman's last request?"

Elias's heart pounded so hard it made his chest ache. "I will protect her in any way I can, Your Grace. I swear it."

"Even from herself?" the duchess continued.

"You ask a great deal." He wondered at the woman, and what she could read it meant by his protecting Celia once she was gone.

"I am allowed to ask a great deal," she said, "because I am dying, but I managed a more congenial smile. "Celia is her own worst enemy," she noted Raines. But if you endeavor to love her and win her love in return, you will discover yourself blessed beyond your wildest imaginings. I promise you that."

"You asked me to protect her," he gently reminded her. "Not love her."

"Love is the greatest protection of all, Lord Raines. If she is loved, she knows herself to be loved, she can survive anything." She pointed at him.

"And the same goes for you. You should thank me for such wisdom."

"And have you told her of this last request of yours?" He could not see Celia's reaction. Vividly.

The duchess managed a weak, lilting chuckle. "At present, you are confused about her feelings for you. But you can change that." She lifted her hand.

"Gransdon—ink and quill before my strength fully leaves me today."

"Yes, Your Grace." Gransdon hurried over to the table in the corner.



visible. fetched them along with a small rosewood lap desk.

. She is “Berta, raise me up.” The duchess weakly waved her maid closer.

Berta hurried to prop the dowager higher among her pillows and set the desk on her lap while Gransdon held the inkwell for her.

pression Elias showed the duchess where to sign and initial. Once she completed the task, he handed the copies to Gransdon. “You and Berta sign beside me on Grace’s signature on the last page of each copy. Along with today please.”

re quite “Yes, my lord.” Gransdon tipped a nod for Berta to follow him.

then us.” The maid removed the lap desk and carried it over to the table, and then Gransdon laid out the three copies of the will.

him. “I “Help an old woman settle more comfortably, my lord.” The duchess shifted and plucked at her coverings, wincing as though in a great pain.

at Celia “Gladly, Your Grace.” Elias helped her slide deeper into the pillows to recline even more. “Pardon my forwardness, but did your physician suggest laudanum for your pain?”

re truly “I refuse to take laudanum,” she said. “The dreadful stuff makes things I would prefer not to revisit.” She patted her chest and pulled in a sharp breath. “And it makes it harder for me to draw in a satisfying breath as well, Lord

He knelt beside her and whispered, “My auntie hated laudanum too. A generous glass of good whisky took its place very nicely.”

ise you The duchess smiled and whispered back, “I wonder if we have any more.”

“If you do not, I shall send for some immediately.” Elias rose to his feet as Gransdon returned the signed and witnessed copies of the will.

ved and “Gransdon, scour the place for whisky—a good whisky, mind you. If you find it, send for it. It will help Her Grace immensely.”

ords of The butler turned to the duchess and waited.

“Please do, Gransdon.” She seemed almost relieved.

picture “At once, Your Grace.” He bowed and hurried out the door.

“I shall leave you now, Your Grace.” Elias wished he could do more for the lady than recommend whisky to numb her pain. He held up the signed copy. “Shall I place a copy in the library on my way out?”

for the The duchess gave another weary chuckle. “If you can make it find the she-dragon hiding in her treasury of books, then yes, by all means, please do.” She nestled deeper into her pillows and smiled. “In fact, please do go

library, Lord Raines. See if you can't find a way to make amends with me and get started on that promise you made to me."

steadied Elias couldn't help but smile. "You are a formidable woman, Your Grace."

Completed She barely shook her head. "Perhaps, once. But no longer." She hid her eyes. "Leave me now. I am tired."

's date, "Rest well, Your Grace." Elias eased from the room, pausing and stepped into the hall to offer up a silent prayer to ease the woman's suffering. As he lifted his head, a flash of color in the hallway downstairs caught his eye.

The elusive, lovely, and yet most frustrating Miss Bening. No. Not Duchess Bening. His Celia. He smiled at the memory of the dowager's charge to deal with Celia's love and love her in return. He had already completed half the

His love for her was the simple part. His beguiling lioness had captured his heart the first time she roared at him.

ian not Papers in hand, he descended the steps with his focus on the library door.

Knowing Celia, she had probably locked it. But then again, perhaps she hadn't. Perhaps she believed he hadn't seen her. He paused with his hand on a deep door handle and listened for movement on the other side. Nothing came. "Well," a lonely echo of a clock ticking away the minutes came to him. He turned the handle and smiled when it clicked and the door swung open.

"Celia, I know you are in here." He stepped inside, closed the door behind him, and waited for his eyes to adjust to the absence of light. With his feet heavy curtains drawn and no candles lit, the small fire in the hearth at the other end of the room did little to beat back the darkness. "I brought you Grace's copy of the will. Signed and witnessed as is proper and according to her list of wishes." The paragraph he had added for Celia's own good remained unannounced for now. "I shall place it here in the center of the table so you may file it wherever you wish."

Elias eased deeper into the room, every sense alert to pick up the slightest sound or hint of movement. A floorboard on the second floor squeaked and made him smile. "I want you to know that I did not suggest a carriage ride to Hyde Park as a means of getting information from you. I just meandered around the desk, eying the upper level as he walked. "I suggest I do so." it because I thought it might lift Her Grace's spirits." He listened for the door to reveal Celia's movements again. "And also because I knew you

with her come along too—what with your being her companion. I wanted to have you, Celia. Spend time with *you*. I need you to believe that. You are, Your completely ensorcelled me, dear lady. I can think of no one but you.”

Only the ticking clock continued to break the silence. Elias pulled the closed chair out from behind the desk, scooted it to the foot of the stair, then climbed himself into it. Once fully seated, he angled it so he might comfortably place his feet on the steps while he waited for his delightful she-dragon to emerge from her lair. “I am not leaving until you come out and talk to me. You might find I can be very single-minded when I decide I want something, and I will not wait until you talk to me.”

“You may now leave, Lord Raines. I have talked to you.” Her voice came from the second level, but she remained out of sight.

“I never figured you as one to be childish,” he dared her. “Or cowardly.”

“I am also not one to fall for such a ridiculous attempt to make my door appear. Go away.”

“Indeed.” He stretched out more comfortably and crossed his legs and ankles. “This chair is quite comfortable. I believe I could nap in it. *And* but the just as comfortable up there? I hope not, or we could very well be stuck pushed here for quite some time.”

“You are sorely tempting me to throw books down on your head,” he said. “All that currently stays my hand is my love for the literature collection on the shelves.” The floor above squeaked again, this time much closer than the last. She had to be close to the top of the spiral staircase that led to the second level. “Go away. You have completed the will. Your services are no longer required here.”

“On the contrary—Duchess Thea charged me with another task that I have yet to complete.” He laced his fingers together and propped his head on his middle. He grinned to himself. “And this task could take a lifetime to complete.”

“A lifetime?” she repeated, sounding more frustrated by the moment. “What sort of task would Her Grace give you that could possibly take a lifetime?”

“Protecting you.”

“I am quite capable of protecting myself, thank you.” But the truth would her voice claimed otherwise. “Just go away. Please.”

be with     The unmistakable sound of tears in her request moved him to r  
u havesilently steal up the stairs. “I am not going away. I made a promise  
              duchess and refuse to go back on my word.” As he reached the top, lig  
led thethe round, ornate window in the arch above the bookcases reveale  
oweredd huddling on the floor in front of the shelves, hugging her legs with h  
ly proptucked to her chest and her forehead propped on her knees.

emerge     He sat down beside her, stretched out his legs, and pulled her into  
ou willholding her close as he had ached to do for so very long.

l I want     She twisted and buried her face in his chest, curling tighter i  
t leaveembrace like a child terrified of the dark. Every breath she drew in be  
              hitching shudder that she exhaled with a keening sigh. His heart broke  
e cameas she lost the battle with her tears.

              “I hate crying!” She thumped his chest with her fist and sobbe  
rdly.” harder.

ake me     He stroked her hair and held her, both thankful for the opportunit  
              so and amazed at the dowager’s knowing that Celia needed him to  
s at thethis moment. He pressed a kiss into her silky, jasmine-scented hair and  
Are youhis eyes. “There is no shame in tears,” he said softly. “Let them flow  
stuck inone, and ease your heart.”

              “You...do not...understand,” she hiccupped, then released anothe  
d, Lordhigh-pitched cry.

on these     “Then make me understand. I am not leaving, remember?”

before.     She didn’t answer, just remained silent except for her weeping. I  
secondstayed in his arms, curled on his lap, and for that, he was glad. He  
nolongerneither Lady Sophie nor Lady Ardsmere came searching for her. C  
              Celia was his honor alone, and he would guard that honor fiercely.

. One I     After a while, she resettled herself until her head rested on his sh  
s handsHe enjoyed sitting like this and hoped it lasted quite some time. Eve  
e me ashe hitched in several quick sniffs, then slowly pushed herself uprig  
              kept her gaze downcast as if ashamed to look him in the eyes. She sw  
moment.his chest as though trying to brush away nonexistent crumbs. “I fear  
take acompletely dampened your shirt. Please forgive me.”

              He reached up and touched her face, running his thumb across he  
to wipe away the trails of her tears. “Will you forgive me f  
emor inmisunderstanding in the park?”

              A corner of her mouth quivered upward as though she wanted t

ise andbut wasn't quite ready. "Yes, my lord. I forgive you."

to the "Elias," he reminded her softly, while gently pulling her closer.

ht from "Elias," she repeated, as though entranced. Her lips parted as h  
d Celialowered to his mouth, and she pulled in a shaking breath. "Are you g  
er chinkiss me?"

"If you will allow it."

his lap, "I will," she whispered, then leaned in and hesitantly touched her  
his. She halted and drew back the slightest bit. "But be warned—I ha  
nto hisread about kissing. Never have I put it into practice."

came a "Then let us test your comprehension of the literature you studie  
for herslid his fingers up into her thick, loosely bound hair and cradled her

he tilted her back. Starting slowly, so as not to frighten her, he nibbled  
d evenacross the soft suppleness of her mouth and tasted her with teasing f

his tongue. She surprised him by sliding her arms around his ne  
y to doopening to him, pulling him in as if starving, to commit fully to the uni  
survive He tightened his embrace and poured every ounce of his yearning

l closedShe tasted of wonderment, need, and passion, waiting to be unleash  
w, dearsoft weight of her on his lap combined with her mouth against his ma

groan, then stop himself before doing something rash. This was  
er long,proper time for anything more than a heated kiss. To take advantage

lovely Celia now, when she was at her most vulnerable, would  
unforgivable disgrace and make him appear to be a rakehell of the wo  
But sheHis Celia deserved better.

hoped "Why did you stop, my lord?" Her breathy whisper almost ma  
alminggroan again. "Did I botch the kiss?"

"Absolutely not." He cupped her cheek and tenderly stroked his  
oulder.across the plump swell of her bottom lip. "Your kissing is beyond cor  
ntually,He gently but firmly eased her upright and sat her on the floor besid  
ght, but" "But I fear, my precious lioness, that if we continue enjoying such fo  
riped atpleasure, we might lose all reason and do something we might later reg

I have She gave him a look that hovered somewhere between fru  
perplexed, and pleased. "*Precious lioness?*"

r cheek A soft, huffing laugh escaped him. "Forgive me, but from o  
for ourmeeting, I have always thought of you as a fiercely beautiful, gree  
lioness."

o smile "Indeed?" She cocked a brow to a stern slant but then smiled. "Ar

would you say if I told you that you reminded me of a great, golden panther I once saw at a menagerie in Hamburg?"

er gaze "I would say that we are two well-matched members of the P... joining togenus." He reached over and took her hand, lacing his fingers with her need to touch her, to remain connected even in the slightest way through him like an unquenchable blaze. "Will you let me protest lips to Celia?" he asked softly. "Draw closer and share every secret so you've only finally let down your guard and enjoy all that life offers?"

She shifted with a heavy sigh and drew her hand away, but at least remained sitting on the floor beside him. "You have no idea what you head as She drew her knees up again and hugged them, returning to the usual gently position in which he had found her. "You have no idea," she repeated softly that he almost didn't hear.

ck and "I could have an idea," he gently chided, knowing he risked pushing farther away rather than closer. "All you need do is trust me. Tell me into it troubles you, dear lady. Let me chase your demons away."

ed. The Celia pushed herself up from the floor and shook the wrinkles from her dress. "Please excuse me, Lord Raines. It is high time I cease my sulk and not return to Her Grace." She paused and took a deep breath, her body of the quivering. "She is not well today. Not well at all."

be an "Lord Raines?" His heart sank even though her tone suggested the first sort, not like using that form of address any more than he enjoyed hearing her stand and moved closer, determined to make her see.

de him She stared up into his eyes, then sadly touched his face and cracked her cheek in her palm. "I am sorry, Elias," she whispered. "It must be my thumb Raines from now on. For your sake as well as mine." She let her hand fall and moved past him to go to the stairs.

de him. Elias turned and caught her, then gently but firmly pulled her back. "Why, Celia? Tell me why, I beg you."

gret." She pushed away and shook her head. "Goodbye, Lord Raines." Then she hurriedly descended, skimmed down the steps and out the library door before he could stop her.

ur first  
one-eyed

id what

would you say if I told you that you reminded me of a great, golden-eyed panther I once saw at a menagerie in Hamburg?”

“I would say that we are two well-matched members of the *Panthera* genus.” He reached over and took her hand, lacing his fingers with hers. The need to touch her, to remain connected even in the slightest way, raged through him like an unquenchable blaze. “Will you let me protect you, Celia?” he asked softly. “Draw closer and share every secret so you might finally let down your guard and enjoy all that life offers?”

She shifted with a heavy sigh and drew her hand away, but at least she remained sitting on the floor beside him. “You have no idea what you ask.” She drew her knees up again and hugged them, returning to the unhappy position in which he had found her. “You have no idea,” she repeated so softly that he almost didn’t hear.

“I could have an idea,” he gently chided, knowing he risked pushing her farther away rather than closer. “All you need do is trust me. Tell me what troubles you, dear lady. Let me chase your demons away.”

Celia pushed herself up from the floor and shook the wrinkles from her dress. “Please excuse me, Lord Raines. It is high time I cease my sulking and return to Her Grace.” She paused and took a deep breath, her bottom lip quivering. “She is not well today. Not well at all.”

“Lord Raines?” His heart sank even though her tone suggested she did not like using that form of address any more than he enjoyed hearing it. He stood and moved closer, determined to make her see.

She stared up into his eyes, then sadly touched his face and cradled his cheek in her palm. “I am sorry, Elias,” she whispered. “It must be *Lord Raines* from now on. For your sake as well as mine.” She let her hand drop and moved past him to go to the stairs.

Elias turned and caught her, then gently but firmly pulled her back. “Why, Celia? Tell me why, I beg you.”

She pushed away and shook her head. “Goodbye, Lord Raines.” Then she skimmed down the steps and out the library door before he could stop her.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

“YOU ARE QUITE sure you wish to continue? I do not want you to o  
Celia took the package of ribbons and combs from her mother as they :  
out of the shop. She handed it to Friedrich, who had waited outside, s  
at attention like a personal guard. He accepted the small bundle and p  
with the others he held in the crook of his muscular arm. Celia felt the  
protected by the dedicated giant who greatly resembled the Viking e  
in the book of Norse sagas back in her library. She was glad the footn  
accompanied them from Germany.

When her mother didn't answer, Celia cleared her throat to  
attention. “Your Grace? Did you hear me?”

“My hearing is exemplary.” Duchess Thea turned from perusing i  
another shop window and fixed Celia with a warning look. “My tolera  
over-coddling is not.” She saucily patted the back of her hat as if ens  
was tipped to the most fashionable angle. “I am enjoying an exhilarat  
of wellness and vigor. Do not spoil it.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Celia forced a smile and pretended all was  
when in fact, all she wanted to do was curl up and cry. She was mi  
lonely and destined to become even more so once Mama died. Esp  
since she had sent Elias on his way.

But her mother's beaming happiness made her shake herself. No  
not the time to sulk about like a spoiled child. A day of improved he  
Mama was a rare gift and deserved better.

She pointed at the next shop in the multitude of businesses lini  
sides of the busy street. “I believe Sophie and Frannie are in this bo  
Would you like to pop in there too?”

Mama wrinkled her nose as though fighting back a sneeze.  
enjoying such energy, I would love to visit the Bond Street bazaar, ar  
if time permits, move on to the Pantheon for more browsing. I kno  
adore poring over the oldest and mustiest of books in the shops, but



you mind very much passing on it this time?” Her smile seemed apologetic. “I need the hustle and bustle of people and light right now I have been starved of it for so very long.”

“I can sort through musty old books anytime,” Celia said. “Just give me a moment to see if Sophie and Frannie are ready to come along with us to the bazaars.” She turned to Friedrich and gave him a silent *watch over* look.

“*verdo.*” The footman nodded and moved a step closer to the duchess, all the while stealing glances up and down the street. The devoted man trusted no one standing by Celia was glad of it.

She hurried into the small, cluttered shop and collided with Elias inside the door. Her heart shot into her throat and nearly choked her. Things teetered off balance. “Oh my! I do beg your pardon, Lord Raines. I can’t help it, I had to forgive me.”

He steadied her by catching hold of her shoulders, then jerked himself away as if touching her burned him. Taking a step back, he curtly replied,

“There is nothing to forgive, Miss Bening.” Then something both daring and exhilarating flickered in his eyes. His rumbling voice deepened for something akin to a warning growl. “Actually, there is much that requires my attention both an apology and forgiveness, but I daresay such matters would be better addressed elsewhere.”

She stiffened. How dare he say such a thing where it might be overheard by any number of people? Rather than argue and risk making herself a laughing stock, she gave a deep curtsy, then hurried around him, hoping to escape. She spotted her friends at the counter chatting with the shop owner as they paid for their purchases. She hurried over and took refuge between them as they turned to go. “Duchess Thea wishes to go to the Bond Street Pantheon, perhaps the Pantheon. Does that not sound lovely?”

“Indeed.” Sophie eyed her as if wondering what was wrong, then brushed past her and assumed a polite smile to go along with a belated curtsy. “How nice to see you again, Lord Raines. How nice to see you again.”

“Lady Sophie.” Elias bowed to her, then to Frannie. “Lady Arden.” He fixed a narrow-eyed scowl on Celia. His jaw flexed as if he was grinding his teeth while contemplating how best to endure her existence.

“Lord Raines.” Frannie curtsied, then reached across Celia and took hold of Sophie’s arm. “Come, Sophie. I forgot to show you the book I

almost that you simply must purchase for your brother's collection."  
; Celia. "But we already made our purchases," Sophie said while scrambling  
her.

ve me a "We can make more." Frannie tugged her out of sight around the e  
s to the tall bookcase.

· *Mama* An irritating sense of being abandoned filled Celia as she watch  
sisters by choice disappear. No matter. She could handle this alone.

e while She stoked her courage and faced Elias. Leaning close, she lowe  
ne, and voice. "You have no reason to be so disagreeable."

"I beg to differ." He widened his stance, as though expecting her  
ias just for the door. "I intend to keep my word to the duchess, and you are  
: as shemy task most difficult. I do not appreciate it when my tasks are  
Pleased difficult."

She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from blurting out something  
s hands improper in a public place. "I am sorry you feel that way, my lord. T  
nodded. when I tell you that I only do what is best for all concerned."

ngerous Her fickle body did not agree. It flashed hot with the memory of  
ned to and the delightful warmth of his embrace. She swallowed hard, her  
requires burning while her heart pounded to the point of making her breathless.

e better His striking appearance didn't help. His navy cutaway coat emp  
his broad shoulders, and his buff-colored pantaloons and polished black  
er heard perfectly displayed his long, muscular legs that had made such a very i  
im say on which to sit. Her entire body tingled at the recollection. Thankfu  
ping to smugness of his expression made the breathtaking tingles give way  
wner as indignant anger that helped her regain control.

en them Celia lifted her chin, ready to fight. "Perhaps you should speak w  
bazaar Grace. She is most understanding, and I feel certain would happily  
you from your oath." She dismissed herself with a curtsy then went  
looked around him, and he blocked her way again.

"Good "No, thank you, Miss Bening. I do not make oaths lightly. Nor do  
go back on them." His entirely-too-perceptive smile widened, irritat  
smere." even more.

gritting "Let me pass," she said through clenched teeth. "Her Grace is just  
and should not be kept waiting."

caught His dark brows ratcheted higher. "Her Grace is outside?"

of maps She refused to repeat herself to this infuriating man. Instead, she

to step around him again.

ng after And again, he blocked her, but this time he offered his arm. “Allow me to escort you, Miss Bening,” he said entirely too loud.

nd of a “This is not appropriate.” She struggled to keep her tone civil while he would much rather scream and rant at him. “Remember your station, my lady,” she said for his ears alone. “I am beneath it.”

red hersuggest you accept the offer of my arm because people are staring. Or do you have what you wish?”

to bolt A quick glance revealed several patrons were indeed becoming interested in their conversation. Probably because Lord Raines had made blocked the door to prevent her exit but kept everyone else from leaving well. An irritated huff escaped her as she took his arm. “Happy?”

g; highly “Quite.” He enraged her even more by adding a victorious wink. “Sophie, Lady Ardsmere, would you care to join us?” he called out. He opened the door while bending his arm tight enough to keep Celia imprisoned in the crook of it. To escape, she would have to make a scolding and cheeks yanking free, and he knew it.

Celia stood at his side and aimed an angry glare at Sophie and Friedrich as they emerged from around the bookcase. “Traitors,” she accused under her breath as they passed in front of her. At least they both had the decency to duck their heads in a failed attempt at hiding their pride at the success of their treachery.

to the When she and Elias joined the others outside, the dowager met them with happiness outshining them all. “What a fortuitous meeting, Lord Raines. Join our outing, won’t you?”

release Before Elias could reply, Celia spoke for him. “I am sure Lord Raines has other business to step busy with far more important matters than shopping.” She tried to release her arm, but before she could escape, he covered her gloved hand with his other hand and held it firmly in place.

ing her “I would be delighted to join you, Your Grace,” he said. “Shall we go in my carriage?”

outside “But we are entirely too many,” Celia argued, frantic for an escape from this most uncomfortable development. “Even with Friedrich in the carriage box, we are still five.”

moved “Nonsense,” her mother said. “Friedrich will bring our carriage with us.”

Sophie and Lady Ardsmere. You and I will join Lord Raines for the evening in his barouche that I had to forgo the other day. We shall all be in Bond Street.” She turned to Sophie and Frannie. “Would that suit, my dear? Please say it does. After all, with two carriages, we shall have even a room for whatever treasures we find.”

“I think it a splendid idea, Your Grace.” Frannie curtsied while a pink soot-colored Celia’s fuming glare. “What a shame our mothers were trapped into attending that Lady Bournebridge’s Venetian breakfast. They will be most jealous when they hear of our adventures that they missed.”

“Our outing is sure to be more enjoyable than any time spent with only Bournebridge.” Elias patted Celia’s hand again, then gave it an inviting squeeze.

“Release me,” she growled under her breath. She wished she could have given his arm a painful pinch but knew it would fail through his coat sleeve.

“I will never release you, Miss Bening,” he said with an intense look. “Let us be gone by way, shall we?”

Sophie and Frannie deserted her once again, but did cast an apologetic glance her way as they hurried along with Friedrich back to the carriage. A moment after he summoned his vehicle with a tip of his hat, Raines’s fine barouche pulled up beside them and came to a halt. His driver, Jamison, hopped down, gave a respectful bow, then opened the carriage door.

“Your Grace.” Elias helped the duchess into the carriage and waited to make sure she was safely seated. Then he turned and smiled at Celia. “Miss Bening?”

“You are a true churl, my lord,” she said as she took his hand. He smiled even broader, then leaned in close and whispered, “Please ease his sharp tongue, my fine lioness. I much prefer the way you used it in your library.”

Her cheeks burned so hotly, she knew she must look as if she had smeared a whole tin of rouge on each of them. She climbed into the carriage, but when she went to sit beside her mother, she discovered the seat blocked off by the duchess’s cane and reticule. She scowled at the articles on the seat, then shifted her glare to her mother. “Your Grace?”

The duchess assumed a smug demeanor, then unleashed a grin that rivaled any Cheshire cat. “Sit in the other seat, Celia. I do not wish

lovely crowded.”

meet at Celia glared at her mother, willing her to move her things. The duchess's eyes danced with a slyness befitting a most impudent child.

no more “Do be seated, Miss Bening,” Elias said. He motioned to the empty chair that faced her impossible mother.

voiding Celia threw herself into it with a very unladylike huff, but she didn't intend

How could all of them—Mama, Sophie, and Frannie—turn against her when she knew she could not allow a closeness between herself and Lord Raines. The preservation of *all* their carefully constructed lives forbade it. The

h Lady seducing the man to manipulate him had been a faulty one indeed. Lord Raines was intimate, utterly intractable. And the devil of it was that she found herself even

drawn to him—almost painfully so.

He settled down beside her and intimately nudged his shoulder against hers. “Oh, I do beg your pardon, Miss Bening.” His demeanor shouted that he did not beg her pardon at all and would probably rub against her again on our given half the chance.

“I am so glad we came upon you, Lord Raines,” the duchess said apologetically. “The more the merrier. Do you not agree?”

“Absolutely, Your Grace, and if you will forgive me for making a personal observation, it lifts my heart to see you enjoying such good weather today. Much improved over the last time I saw you.”

“It is indeed a glorious day, and I intend to enjoy it.” The dowager nudged to the toe of Celia's shoe with her cane. “Although there appears to be a storm cloud among us.”

Celia allowed herself an exasperated huff before admitting that she was right. She needed to do better and not allow her frustration to overshadow the gift of this day with her mother in such fine spirits. She offered an apologetic nod. “Forgive me, Your Grace. You are quite right, and I shall remedy it immediately.” She waved her hand in front of her face as she snapped her fingers. “Your winds of happiness have chased the storm cloud away, leaving nothing but sunshine in its place.”

“Well done,” Elias said. His deep voice echoed with genuine admiration and approval.

Celia caught herself smiling at him, so she hurried to turn away.

Elias leaned close enough to whisper, “Too late, my lioness. I see you smile.” His warm breath tickled her ear in a most disturbing way.

“A proper gentleman would not comment on such, Lord Raines.”  
“I neither wish to be proper nor a gentleman in your company.”  
his hand under hers and brought it to his mouth for a kiss. “For the  
ty seat your reputation, however, I shall endeavor to do both.”

She swallowed hard and pulled her hand away. Even through her  
i’t care, the warmth of his mouth made her yearn for another private moment.  
r? They him in the library. “Polite Society demands that a gentleman not  
es. The woman’s hand unless he knows her very well.”

idea of “I am working on that part.” His lazy smile sent a renewed surge  
He was through her.

n more “On what part?”

His deep, rumbling laugh vibrated through her. “Knowing you very  
against “My hearing is impeccable, Lord Raines,” the duchess warned  
that he dark look.

again if Elias straightened and sat taller. “Forgive me, Your Grace, but  
know I only possess the best of intentions when it comes to the ch  
as they Miss Bening. I would do nothing to cause her distress or ruin.”

“That is good to know, my lord.” The duchess’s scrutiny of him had  
a very as she spoke. “I shall haunt you if you cause her heartache or unhappy  
l health that quite clear?”

“As the purest water.” He slightly bowed his head, then pressed a  
tapped his chest. “I gave you my oath earlier, Your Grace. I intend to see it through  
a little “It is very rude to speak around a person as if they are not present.

edged as far from Elias as the padded seat of the carriage allowed.  
Mama popped open her parasol and held it out to her mother. “You are facing  
ions to sun, Your Grace.”

ts. She Her mother laughed and waved it away. “I like the sun on my face  
correct, longer have the need to worry about receiving a freckle or two.  
er face, yourself, dear girl.” She wiggled in the seat like a child excited ab  
ie little outing. “Your carriage gives a most pleasant ride, Lord Raines. Good  
smiled upon us by crossing our paths today.”

niration “And what do you think, Miss Bening?” He quirked a brow at  
devilment in his smile.

“I think I am glad we have arrived.” Celia waved at the carriage  
aw that up behind them as they slowed to a stop. “And Frannie and Sophie have  
She couldn’t resist sending a teasing glance Elias’s way. “Are you qu

you are ready to accompany four ladies shopping?”

He slid “I wouldn’t miss this for the world.” He rubbed his hands together for the sake of jumped out of the carriage and helped the dowager duchess step down.

Celia’s traitorous heart beat faster as he turned back and helped her with her glove, “Thank you, Lord Raines,” she said, then reluctantly removed her hand from his.

kiss a He tipped his head her way, then offered his arm to the dowager. “Grace?”

of heat “It has been an age since I have walked on the arm of such a handsome young rake,” Duchess Thea teased.

A crashing wave of relief, disappointment, and perhaps a bit of guilt threatened to drown Celia as she fell in step behind them. Frannie and Sophie caught up with her and took their places on either side, both as if with appropriately crestfallen expressions for their earlier abandonment of her.

please “You needed to spend time with him,” Sophie whispered.

arming “In whose opinion?” Celia struggled to hold the fake smile that made her cheeks ache.

ardened “Our mothers.” Frannie cut a quick nod at the duchess. “And Her Grace?”

ness. Is “This is utterly ridiculous.” Celia slowed her steps so they could fall in and carry on a normal conversation. “A match with Lord Raines is important to— for the safety of all of us. Our mothers should understand that.”

rough.” “According to Maman, they all believe that once you inherit the title, you can allow the sixth Duke of Hasterton to fade from existence and enjoy the life of your own for a change.” Sophie’s dubious shrug conveyed her opinion that such a plan would fail.

Celia agreed. It would never work. “Since we are clients of the peerage and no Lord Raines, I doubt my *brother* will be allowed to so easily return to the Shadeland of imagination from whence he came.” She shook her head. “Even if he took over for Master Hodgely, Lord Raines has attempted to control the fortune of a fictitious twin at least a dozen times. The man is relentless.”

“And dashing,” Frannie said in a wistful tone. “You can’t deny that Celia, are attracted to him.”

“And he appears *very much* attracted to you,” Sophie said.

pulling Celia paused at a vendor selling small, delicately carved rosewood trinkets. “Perfect for holding tiny treasures on a dressing table or nightstand. She has a nice sure finger across one of the creations decorated with hearts entwined

roses. “My heart must remain as empty as this box.” She firmly closed the lid. “Permanently.”

“You plan to never marry?” Frannie stared at her in open-mouthed wonder.

“You have to marry.” Sophie looped her arm through Celia’s and gave her a comforting pat. “Frannie and I have no intention of living without you.” “Neither should you.”

“And how do the two of you intend to accomplish such a feat and become someone charged with fraud and hanged for it?” Celia didn’t want to sound bitter or waspish, but the Sisterhood created by their mothers was a double-edged sword. While it secured their lands, finances, and places in Society, Sophie effectively trapped them. Celia couldn’t imagine attempting to hide something from a husband—nor revealing them. “Well? Tell me how you manage to juggle a family and the lie our lives truly are?”

“I have not thought that far as yet,” Frannie said. “But we will figure it out. Will we not, Sophie?”

“Yes.” Sophie tugged Celia away from the stall of trinket boxes. “Come. They are looking back to see what has become of you.”

“Did you find a treasure?” the duchess asked when they joined their mother. “A little rosewood box,” Celia said. “You know how I love trinket boxes.”

She glanced across the line of stalls her mother had passed. “Did you not find any items too precious to leave behind?”

“We have been admiring the artwork,” Elias said before the duchess could answer. He pinned Celia with an intense look. “And talking.”

“Talking?” Celia eyed her mother. Instinct warned her that any conversation with Elias could only mean trouble.

The duchess smiled but didn’t elaborate. Instead, she turned and led them onward with the demeanor of a queen followed by her retinue.

What should have been an enjoyable outing became a subtle form of torture to be endured. And endure it she would. With the utmost grace and style. Following her mother and Elias, Celia chatted with Sophie and Frannie while feigning interest in the expensive finery and wares of the stalls crowded to Society’s most affluent. As they reached the midpoint of the Bonded Boxes bazaar, she spotted temporary salvation—seats and small tables arranged in front of a merchant selling lemonade. Surely, Mama would agree to sit with her while and enjoy a refreshing drink. While her color and spirits still



sed the good, she had to be growing tired.

Celia hurried to the front of their group and drew their attention to the place. “Shall we enjoy a refreshing lemonade before we continue?”

Her mother opened her mouth to speak, but Elias cut her off. “I gave it wise indeed. After all, we still have much to see.” He eased the dowry into love, the idea with a convincing tip of his head. “Even the heartiest of us know it best to pace oneself in order to finish the race.”

The duchess rewarded him with a thoughtful smile. “Of course, not a cruel lemonade sounds like a welcome respite before we continue.”

Elias’s firm but gentle maneuvering of her mother touched Celia more than it should have. He was neither a graceless rake nor a jealous, their avaricious second son, but a kind, caring gentleman.

A wistful sigh escaped her as she watched him help her mother be seated at one of the tables. As soon as the longing breath left her, he lifted his hand and their gazes locked. Somehow, he knew she longed for him. She saw it clearly in his eyes. And perhaps a yearning for her as well.

“And Miss Bening?” He held out his hand and waited, knowing she would not be able to resist taking it.

“My lord.” She went to him and slid her hand into his.

The faintness of his smile, the way it quirked the fullness of his lips, the teasing of his irresistible dimple into appearing, made her catch her breath.

Elias Raines was a danger to all she had ever known—including her mother—and he knew it. How much he knew about her circumstances, she could not hazard a guess, but she suspected that it was entirely too much for her sort of comfort of her mind and soul.

He seated her in the chair beside her mother, helped Sophie and Frannie and led them into seats at the next table, then returned and sat next to Celia. With a flick of his wrist, he caught the merchant’s eye. “Lemonades all around, my lord. Her Grace must be restored for more shopping.”

The stall owner’s eyes lit up. “Right away, Your Grace, right away.”

“Careful, my lord,” Celia couldn’t resist warning him. “I am to be careful. Catering and posing as a duke can be quite dangerous.”

Elias laughed. “My defense will be that the man was speaking to my Grace and not myself.” He winked. “You simply need to know how to sit for such circumstances, Miss Bening.”

“Indeed.” Celia sorted through the contents of her reticule, not

compose herself than check what she had brought along. The curiosity to the wondering about what her mother had confided in Elias had her sit with thorns.

think it “I cannot believe we found nothing to purchase other than lemonade,” the duchess said with a sad shake of her head. “Perhaps we should retrace our steps to Oxford Street.”

“Whatever you wish, Your Grace.” Celia held tightly to the hand of the young lord. They would indeed go back to Oxford Street and its many shops. From there, if luck smiled upon her, Mama would soon proclaim their outing at its end, and she and the young lord would be ready to return home. Then Celia could take refuge in either the library or the garden—either would be a haven where Elias most certainly would not be. She hazarded an indulgent glance his way. “I am sure Lord Raines is ready to be on his way.”

“Oh no, dear Celia.” Her mother paused while lifting her lemonade glass. “Lord Raines has agreed to delight us with his company for dinner, though it will be a simple affair. Isn’t that splendid?”

“Splendid,” Celia repeated, wondering how Elias had elicited such an invitation with such ease. “In that case, should we forgo the shops and return home to inform Mrs. Harcourt?”

Elias waved away her suggestion. “We must not cut the day short when Her Grace is in such fine health. I agreed to dinner because I have a great heart—prolong my presence in your company—not because I seek a meal. A plate of cold meats would be a most satisfying banquet in the presence of so many lovely ladies.”

Mama, Sophie, and Frannie all responded with silly smiles, appearing to be the victim to the blatant flattery. Celia rolled her eyes.

“Why, Miss Bening.” He quirked a brow and leaned toward her with a goodfeigned incredulity. “Do you doubt my sincerity?”

“Of course not, Lord Raines.” She wouldn’t add that it was his intention to make her feel that she found questionable. She pushed her lemonade away, suddenly finding it too bitter to endure. “I merely felt a bit of dust in my eye.”

“Perhaps I should check it for you,” he offered. “Come and let me see it.” Celia scooted away from the table and hopped to her feet. “Thank you, Her Grace. I am quite recovered now. It appears to have resolved itself as quickly as it came.” Doing her best to remain a picture of composure, she moved back in the direction in which they came. “While Her Grace finishes her dinner, I shall go to the library to check the books.”

constant lemonade, I believe I shall return to the trinket box stall. I have decided I cannot bear to leave the hearts and roses creation behind after all. I curtsied to her mother. "That is, with your permission, Your Grace." "Do whatever you need to do to get your wants sorted," her mother said. The true meaning of the subtle warning was not lost on Celia. She added a barely perceptible nod. "Indecision is the ruin of many, Celia. Do not do anything in a halfhearted manner." "Yes, Your Grace." Celia only wished it were that easy.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

ELIAS SAVORED THE last bite of the delectable syllabub topped with berries. The day had gone even better than he had hoped it would. He had to remember to add an appreciative amount to Jack's voucher when Bow Street Runner came to his office for payment. If not for the man's action, Elias would never have known where or when to cross paths with lovely Celia.

From his seat of honor to the right of the dowager duchess, he had watched the ladies at dinner with a more critical eye. The nuances of their glances and their mannerisms provided more information than he realized. The three young women behaved more like sisters than friends, and the duchess could easily be mistaken for a favorite aunt.

Lady Sophie's mother and Lady Ardsmere's mother-in-law were present, denying him the possibility of observing them as well. Poor Monty. Probably still trapped at Lady Bournebridge's affair. He couldn't help but grin. His brother, the Duke of Almsbury, was trapped there also, and a certain amount of blunt could tempt Elias to trade places with Monty. At least Monty possessed the title. Such engagements were his due.

Elias suddenly realized he had allowed the conversation to lag and was thinking back over the day. He forced himself to set his inner musing aside. "A fine repast, Your Grace. Most satisfying." He waved away the footman stepping forward with a salver of sweetmeats and nuts. "No, thank you. I'm quite finished, my good man."

The duchess pushed herself to her feet and moved away from the table with the aid of her cane. "What a shame we have no gentleman with whom you could enjoy a glass of port or a bit of snuff."

Elias hurried to stand and bow. "I assure you, Your Grace, I do not regret their company in the least." And he meant it. The mysterious ladies of the household enthralled him—especially his precious Celia. And from what he had observed, they all guarded secrets and possessed no desire whatsoever

immerse themselves in the vicious and highly competitive Marriage of the ton.

Of course, fragile health curtailed the dowager's engagements, and Ardsmere was already a wife. But something about that lady whispered her marital status might be a lie. At one point during their robust conversation, he had mentioned her husband, and she had almost acted as if she didn't know to whom he referred. At that same moment, Celia had choked on her wine and begged to recover in the garden, claiming an urgent need for fresh air. Lady Sophie had then excused herself when the announcement of a sudden headache, and the duchess sent Lady Ardsmere's quick help her to her room. This household had become a puzzle he itched to solve with the

The duchess slowly crossed the room and nodded at the large footman who had accompanied them shopping. "Friedrich, please studied Berta. I am ready to retire." With an apologetic look at Elias, she pulled in a deep breath, then slowly released it. "Forgive me, Lord Raines. I do not mean to be rude, but I find today's adventures catching up with me."

"You could never be rude, Your Grace." Elias genuinely liked the duchess and wished fate had granted her a kinder destiny. He fully intended to do her wishes for him to protect and cherish Celia—and would have complied even without her request. "With your permission, might I step into the garden to help but ensure Miss Bening has recovered from her sudden need for fresh air and no

The dowager stared at him, her expression stony and unreadable. "After all, as fragile and vulnerable as a frightened child at the moment. I understand you bade you protect her. Win her love and love her in return." She glared toward him, thumping her cane harder with every step. "But I pray I have not misplaced my trust in you."

She stamped her cane hard one last time as the footman glared at him. "Do not hurt her, or I promise you, there will be hell to pay for you. I am

This woman spoke like a loving mother, not an ailing peeress who showed particular fondness for her companion. Elias tried not to take insult or offense from her concerns. "I would never hurt her, Your Grace, but I need her to come to me so I can help her with whatever puts that frightened look in her eyes." He resettled his stance, trying to find the words to reassure the lady that he had not meant the best for Celia. "I know she dreads your death with the whole of this being, but I daresay that is not the entirety of her worries."

The dowager nodded and leaned heavily on her cane. "You may go to the garden, Lord Raines." She turned away and slowly headed toward the

Mart of exit. "Stay as long as required, but do me the courtesy of being discreet if you choose to leave. I will not have Celia ruined." When she reached Ladydouble doors that opened to the hallway, she halted and looked back. "I shall have Friedrich stand guard at this entrance where he may help if she should call out for help." Her eyes narrowed again, and this time her expression was quite readable. "Friedrich will do whatever is necessary to nearly protect my Celia. Am I understood clearly?"

Urgent "Quite clearly, Your Grace."

With the "Good." She tipped a curt nod and left him.

There to Elias turned and eyed the set of glass doors to the sprawling garden. The doors were opened wide to invite the cool evening air into the dining room of a blond London townhouse, such a generous layout was a rarity, and usually not found in country manors. He ambled through the doors and pulled in a deep breath of the refreshing air delicately scented with the earthy new growth of spring. It beckoned him to come and lose himself in the private oasis.

Torches flickered throughout the intimate layout of the peaceful garden. Their golden glow followed the path of stepping stones winding through a maze of shrubbery and raised beds of freshly turned earth that would soon burst with colorful flowers. The gentle sound of trickling water came from the garden but he didn't see its source. He also didn't see Celia. Had the lovely girl somehow escaped him?

Celia is "Celia?" He followed the path, easing deeper into the personal garden. The stand was larger than it had appeared at first glance. "Celia?"

He moved "I wish they hadn't lit the torches," she said from somewhere off to the left. "It makes the stars less bright."

He and She stepped off the path of stones, rounded a bed of rosebushes, and found her sitting on a bench beside a small, cascading fountain. The water feature fed into a pool bordered by stones that matched the garden, creating the layered levels of the gurgling fountain.

He said "It is peaceful here beside the water," he said quietly, feeling shy. He ashamed to speak and break the fragile spell filling the place. "May I be only you?"

She of her Without taking her gaze from the rippling pool, she patted the empty space on the bench but remained silent.

He to her He eased down beside her and leaned forward, propping his elbow on his knees while gazing at the torchlight dancing across the water's undulating surface.

at when surface.

hed the “Quite remarkable,” he said with genuine reverence.

at him. “Friedrich built it when the gardener complained of this area ear her remaining too wet to grow anything.” She folded her hands in her me her seemed to curl into herself, as if withdrawing into the safety of he sary to “Everyone thinks he is *just* a footman, but he has an eye for seeing before they exist. Somehow, he knows how they should work, and creates them. He repaired many things at the manor in Germany.” H musing tone turned bitter. “Such a brilliant man, yet hobbled by bei n. They into the wrong class of society.”

1. For a Elias watched her, sensing that she wasn’t only speaking ly only Friedrich’s lowborn plight. “The world is not a fair place.” He strai a deep and turned toward her. “But I think you already know that better than r eerness She shook away his observation with a twitch of her shoulder, the s. her chin to a defensive angle. Once again, she became the fierce il area, keeping everyone at bay. “It is useless to complain. All one can do i ough the change one’s circumstances for the better.” She attempted a smile but ld soon Her bottom lip quivered, and her eyes gleamed with the tears she ref to him, shed. “I have heard it said happiness is a choice, but I find that c lioness difficult to put into practice when circumstances have beco disagreeable.”

len that Even though he feared she would pull away, he reached over and took her hand. “Happiness is easier when two attempt to create it toget f to the She bowed her head and closed her eyes, but didn’t pull away. F he was grateful.

s; yet to He shifted closer until no space existed between them. “The burc ountain, carry wearies you, my brave lioness. Allow me to shoulder it for you.” d those “You cannot.”

He gently eased his arm around her and encouraged her to rest h almost on his shoulder. “I can do many things if given half the chance.”

y I join A heavy sigh escaped her, but she remained there, leaning again and clinging to his hand. “I like the way the torchlight dances acr ty spotwater.” She spoke as if caught in a trance, and either unable or unwi break free. “I find the way it lights the ripples calming. Do you?”

s on his “I find this moment both calming and hopeful.” He refused to lie. lulating here with her made everything else fade away. Nothing mattered but l



her at his side.

“Hopeful?” The leeriness had returned to her tone, but she made no attempt to pull away.

“Hopeful that you and I could be...” For the first time in a very long while, he struggled to find the perfect word—the word that would please her and put her at ease.

“What?” she prompted. She lifted her head and eyed him as if trying to decide if he was genuine or playing her for a fool.

“I care for you, Celia, care for you with a ferocity that almost frightens me.” He huffed a bitter, frustrated laugh. “It frightens me because you seem to have nothing to do with me and refuse to tell me why.”

She looked away and once more fixed her sad stare on the glistening pool. “Have you ever been to Germany?”

He stroked the softness of her bare hand that, surprisingly, she had allowed him to hold. “I have not had the pleasure of visiting that country.”

“It is quite lovely.” She stared straight ahead, and a soft smile curved the bow of her tempting mouth. “I could not have spent my childhood in a better place.” She shuddered at the memory like shooting a bothersome bug. When she returned her gaze to him, her smile was gone. “I must go back to Germany with Her Grace.” She swallowed hard and

bit her mouth as if fighting back a sob. “When she passes, she wishes to be gently buried beside her husband.” Hard, fast blinking betrayed her battle with tears, and even though she valiantly fought them, a few still escaped. “I intend to die here in London.” She angrily swiped her fingers across her cheeks, batting the tears away.

He caught both her hands in his. “I will be here, Celia. You will get through it alone. I swear it.” He didn’t bring up that the Duke of Hamilton and his sister would also assist in the laying to rest of their mother. Then Celia spoke as if she were the only one to care for the duchess confusion to no end. “I will help you. You have my word.”

She shook her head and looked away. “Go home, Elias,” she whispered. “Save yourself from this cruel game.”

*Cruel game?* It occurred to him that neither Celia nor the duchess had ever spoken kindly about the duke. Perhaps the man was a monster in disguise. A lesson he would not soon forget. “How did he hurt you?”

Celia turned back to him, confusion drawing her dark brows together.

“Who?”

“The dowager’s son. The duke.”

The way her mouth flattened into a hard line told Elias everything he long needed to know. “I will make him pay, even if I have to search every nook and cranny of this existence to find him. He will pay for whatever he did to you.”

She dropped her gaze to their clasped hands and squeezed his fingers tightly. “Go home, Elias,” she repeated.

“You are my home, Celia.” He lifted her hands and gently kissed her fingers. “Wherever you are, that is where I wish to be.”

“I so wish I could love you,” she said so softly he barely heard it.

He framed her face with his hands. “You can. I will protect you from everything you fear.” He drew closer and brushed the lightest of kisses against her cheek.

She responded with a kiss so urgent, so full of desperation and need. “Love me, Celia, and let me love you in return.” He gathered her closer, and silently swore to never let her go. She fit snugly into his arms and held on to him with such a fierceness that his heart roared with a dangerous thundering.

Unable to resist, he smoothed a hand down her back and cupped her buttocks. “Bottom, risking what would be a very well-earned slap. But rather than punish you for working him a reprimand, she pressed closer, almost crawling into his lap. He shifted until she straddled him. The move nearly undid him, awakened him against the severity of the situation. He broke the kiss, held her back, and stepped away. “She has to look him in the eyes. “Celia—I do not wish to cause you ruin. We must stop.”

“I was ruined at birth.” She slid her hands up his chest and touched his face with such tenderness that he bit back a groan. “I am so very weary of being alone,” she whispered, her sultry voice echoing with despair and a way of hopelessness. “Show me, Elias. Show me what it is like to *not* be so alone. At least for a moment so I can cherish it and remember the feeling.”

“Celia.” He wanted her with a fury that raged but feared how she would feel afterward. “You do not realize what you ask.” It took every ounce of control he possessed to keep from lowering her to the thick carpet of grass and indulging in their passions. “I want you, dear one. More than I can describe.”

He squeezed her shoulders, aching to join with her, but she would not understand, once he claimed her for his own, she would be his forever.

would be no going back. She was not a woman meant for a casual date and he was not a man who would use her and toss her aside. They were not meant to be together. He would have her as his wife.

country “I long for you,” he repeated more softly, “but I do not want to be unhappy.”

is even “Give me happiness, Elias.” She rested a hand on his chest, then tightened her fingers and clutched the front of his shirt. “I ache, but I both of know what I ache for. I yearn but have no idea what I need.” She sadly shook her head. “I am so alone in this world, and sick of this dark, desperate world.”

Bring me into the light, Elias. Make the darkness go away—at least for a little while.”

He lifted her chin and leveled her gaze with his. “If I do this thing for you, there is no going back. I will possess you completely and never let you go. He leaned so close that the tip of his nose nearly touched hers. “You have my name, Celia. Forever. Do you understand? I will always be in your senses on your side. And you will take my name. Be my wife and I will be your husband.”

She locked eyes with him, staring deeply into his soul. So sad. So alone. “Are you capable of unconditional love?” she finally whispered.

“With you, my precious one, I am capable of anything.”

She tilted her head and barely trailed the tip of her finger across his bottom lip. “Then I give myself to you, Elias Raines. Forever. May God have mercy on your soul.”

hed his  
eary of



aching THE SHADOWY GARDEN made Elias’s eyes dark and unreadable, but Celia looked into them anyway. Her complicated world was closing in on her, and she was the only one who could save her.

What they were about to do was immoral, scandalous, and every word of judgmental adjective that described the act she had only read about in soft forbidden books. But she so badly needed to be held, to fully connect with another soul, another heart. She longed to know something about his loneliness, hopelessness, and despair. She would worry about Elias later. She had to get the truth about her at another time. Perhaps what they were about to do. There

loneliness, hopelessness, and despair. She would worry about Elias later. She had to get the truth about her at another time. Perhaps what they were about to do. There

alliance, would restore her, invigorate her, and reveal the miraculous answer to her wouldstark prospect of spending the rest of her life alone.

Feeling as though in a trance, she watched him remove his coat and spread it across the ground, belatedly realizing he did so to protect her dress from grass stains. She wet her lips and swallowed hard. So slowly would lie atop that coat—beneath him.

His neckcloth fluttered to the ground. His waistcoat landed on the ground beside her. With the throat of his shirt open enough to reveal a tempting expanse of muscle that made her palms itch to touch him, he held it fast for a hand. She took it and allowed him to guide her to the coat and gently lay her upon it.

He smiled down at her as she lay beneath him. “You are certain to leave.” asked softly.

“I am.”

He bent his head and nibbled slow kisses along her jaw line. Another shiver stole through her as he continued the tantalizing trail down her collarbone and across her shoulder that he had somehow bared so easily and lovingly. The bodice of her dress suddenly loosened, and she realized he artfully undone her buttons and slid his hand inside the back to undo them of her stays. A gasping breathlessness plagued her as he kissed a wondrous histingling trail down her front while fondling her breasts in a most pleasurable way. “Elias?”

He lifted his head and smiled down at her. “Yes, my lioness?”

She wet her lips, struggling to speak through the pounding of her heart. “This is very nice so far.”

“It is indeed.” He waited, watching her as if offering yet another chance to stop things before they went any farther.

“I want this,” she whispered. “I want you.”

“I am glad, Celia. More glad than you will ever know.” His whisper, deep and rasping, sweeping across her as tantalizing as a caress. About his tenderness that made her hitch in another quick breath, he brushed his hand back from her face. “I have wanted you from the first day we met when I scolded me for being impertinent.”

“Kiss me,” she whispered, fearing if he didn’t, she might say more than she should. His warm weight gently pressed her deeper into the cushions of grass, making her arch against him, needing him to do more. She wasn’t

to the sure what that *more* was. Most of the forbidden books had been confusing about that part, and her mother had refused to speak of it. She closed her eyes and breathed in his scent, an enticing blend of muslin, bergamot, and amber. The solid hardness of his muscular shoulders on, she under her hands, making her greedy to touch him even more. She could enough of him as he kissed her long and deep, filling her with an unbearable chaching that kept growing stronger.

As his hand roamed lower and slipped under her dress, she hugged out his head to her chest, reveling in the way his mouth made her tingle and lower with the tightness of an overwound clock. She struggled to breathe as his fingers trailed up her thighs, then found the place no man had ever touched in?" he before.

"Oh my." She wrapped a leg around him and arched into his head. A squeaking sound escaped her as he slid his fingers inside and treated her to the most delicious sensations she had ever experienced.

He lifted his head from her breast and kissed her tenderly as his hands worked their incredible magic. She ran her hands into his hair and he had tight as the lovely sensations intensified, finding herself unable to resist moaning into his mouth while bucking and writhing into his touch. A wonderfully shocking wave of ecstasy spilled through her with the force of a releasing storm. His arm tightened around her as she jerked and cried out. As the tide ebbed, a burning rip from deep within made her stiffen.

Elias broke the kiss and stared down at her. "All right, my lioness?" she asked. With the sting already gone, she nodded. "I am better than all right." Her gentle preparation of her made her heart soar. Such a caring man. Yet her chance had been the right thing to do. She caressed his cheek and whispered, "I want you."

"As I want you, my Celia. Forever and always." He sealed the words with a kiss as he unbuttoned his falls, then gently slid her skirts up out of the way and settled between her legs. He paused and stared down at her. "I love you, Celia. You understand that—yes?"

Once more, she slid her hands up into his fashionably cropped hair and tangled her fingers in the thick silkiness. "I fear I love you too, Elias." Her sadness almost overpowered her, pushing her close to tears. "I am so sorry."

"Never be sorry, my precious one." He nuzzled a tender kiss across her forehead.

slightly mouth. "Never," he whispered, then gently rocked his hips forward and into her with such a wonderful fullness that she gasped.

of citrus, She drew her legs up around him and hugged him tight, arching and rippled him.

didn't get His teasing thrusts started slow, then gained in speed until reaching a perfect pounding that summoned the crashing wave of ecstasy back stronger than before. Giving herself fully to the blissful explosion, she begged his lip to keep from shouting. Elias buried his face in the curve of her neck and tensely muffled his roar. They shuddered together, clinging to each other as his delight washed across them and left them gasping.

He touched He nibbled kisses along her shoulder, neck, and mouth before rising, staring down at her with a solemn expression. "I will never leave you and. Asaid with a gruff softness. The hint of a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "Not ever."

Still buoyed by the warm glow, Celia managed a lazy smile. "Never, my lord. The future has yet to be written, and the authors of history are sometimes cruel to lovers."

to stop He rolled and pulled her with him, tucking her into the crook of his arm and settling her head in the dip of his shoulder. "I shall begin writing the future tomorrow by applying for a special license so we can marry in the blissful days."

The enormity of what he suggested lodged midway in her chest, a poorly swallowed bite of tough beef. If she married him without revealing the truth, how deeply would he hate her when he found out their marriage was void because she had lied?

"Now I know," she said. "You know I have to return to Germany with Her Grace," she replied to him. "I promised her."

He said with a smile, "We can keep your promise to her together." He pressed a tender kiss to her forehead. "That way I can be the one to deal with any issues that arise with the duke and Lady Cecilia should they choose to treat you ill."

She cuddled closer and remained selfishly silent, knowing the right thing to do would be to tell him now. Tell him everything. Of course, not to Elias. A fine point on it, she should have told him *before* they did what they just did. But after a lifetime of subterfuge and lies, she loathed the idea of losing that precious moment of closeness with Elias to the ugly truth. In fact, she couldn't bear it. But a successful way to keep the wool over his eyes could

d eased escaped her.

“Are you all right, Celia?” His arm tightened around her. “You to meet regretting what just happened?”

She rose and smiled down at him. “I promise you, I will never regretting the just happened.”

—even But instead of smiling back at her, he drew his dark brows together a bit her worried scowl. “Some will say I married you because of your inheritance and Before she could tell him that the long-tongued fools didn’t matter as the continued, “But I added a clause to the will, and Her Grace initiated

trust you inherit will always be yours. Set aside for you and our clinging and should something ever happen to me. I cannot touch a farthing of it, not you,” he sell so much as a mote of dust from any of your future properties.”

of his She stared at him, taken aback at what he had just confessed. “You that because you feared the gossips?”

ever say “I did it because I feared losing you.” He caressed her cheek. “Your fate are want you to believe that my interest in you is because of your wealth.”

Now, she felt even worse about keeping her true identity from him his arm pushed herself up and turned her back to him, unable to look him in the eye. “Could you help me repair myself? With everyone else gone to their within should go too. You know how the servants will talk. Nothing escapes to

“Quite right.” He sat up and worked on her laces, then gifted her a tender kiss to her nape before doing up her buttons. “I will come tomorrow and speak with Her Grace.” He hugged her back against him. “Have you any family I should meet with for their approval?”

She swallowed hard and struggled to control her tone, thankful minded couldn’t see her face, for she knew it would give her away. “I have other than Her Grace. You might say she is my only family.”

kiss to He rose and helped her to her feet, then pulled her into his arms and held her tight. After a long, heavy silence, he whispered into her hair, “What is troubling you?” Celia? Tell me what is troubling you.” He eased back a step and held her shoulders, gazing into her eyes as if trying to delve into her soul. “I will put to rest your husband soon. Let me vanquish the demons who are tormenting you.”

ing this With her hands resting on his chest, she stretched up on tiptoes and kissed him. “You vanquished them by loving me, but you must give me the opportunity to grow accustomed to their absence and realize I can

freely once more.” The lie soured in the back of her throat and burned her conscience. She kissed him again. “I love you, Elias. You should leave so I might hurry up the stairs with as little notice as possible. Agreed?” “Agreed.” He sorted his clothes, then kissed her long and slowly, leaving the garden.

As she watched him go, her tears slipped free, cutting hot streams down her face. She had everything she wanted and yet she didn’t. All could change in the blink of an eye, and the stakes had just risen exponentially.

She hurried to the dining room doors and cocked her head, listening for children, hallway to ensure that Elias was gone and Friedrich had gone downstairs or even to the kitchen. With all quiet, she scurried up the steps and slipped into her mother’s rooms. Knowing Berta slept in the small bedroom adjoining Mama’s, she crept across the sitting room, using only the light of the night candle on the mantel to guide her. She eased open her mother’s bedroom door, slipped in, and never then quietly clicked it shut behind her.

“Celia?”

“Yes, Mama. I came to check on you. Are you all right?” Celia hurried to the bed and climbed up beside her mother just like she had done as a child when troubled by bad dreams.

Mama took her hand and gently squeezed it. “The question is—do you feel all right?”

“I am not sure.” Celia refused to lie to her observant mother, knowing that her denial was futile. Mama always ferreted out the truth. “He means to apply for a special license and intends to visit tomorrow to speak to you about that hemarrying.” She pulled in a deep breath, then released it with a deep hiss. “I did not tell him the truth about who I am.”

“And do you plan to do so before you marry him?” Mama gently squeezed her hand tighter.

“I thought—probably not.”

“The archbishop will not grant a special license if he is unable to prove your eligibility to wed—no matter how well connected Lord Raines is or how much he pays the man.” Her mother’s heavy sigh echoed through the room.

“Since everything about us is based in Germany, I am certain Elias will manage it.” Celia leaned forward, trying to convince herself as well as her mother. “He is a solicitor. Talking his way around things comes naturally to him.” “Even if he is able to procure the license, you do realize your mother



ned her will be invalid if you do not use your full legal name?" Mama plucked  
ve first, bedcovers and shook her head, growing noticeably more agitated. "I  
' wish my grandchildren saddled with the titles of bastards."

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effectively navigate this first twist in the plot?

g to the "You must tell him, Celia."

irs. "If I tell him, I will lose him." Celia covered her face as mo  
mother's burned down her face. "I cannot bear the thought of losing him, Mama  
s, Celia him."

on the Her mother released another heavy sigh. "I am so sorry, my child."  
oped in, Sniffing, Celia searched in vain for the handkerchief she alway  
tucked into her stays. "Why are you sorry?"

"I am sorry because I thought I was protecting you, but ins  
ried to imprison you." Mama reached into her nightstand, withdrew  
a child handkerchief, and handed it to Celia. "I am sorry, my precious child.

to you I never meant you any harm." She laced her fingers togeth  
are you rested her hands on top of her blankets. "Tell him, daughter. T  
everything. Lord Raines appears to be the sort who might know of a  
wing it undo this harm I have brought down upon you."

y for a The pain and sorrow in her mother's voice cut through Celia's he  
out our had to be strong, for Mama's sake—figure this mess out and resolve  
pairing didn't make her mother's journey to the grave any faster. "I love you,  
and I'm proud to be your daughter. You came up with a way to prot  
gently and now it's my turn to protect you."

She leaned over and kissed her mother's cheek. "Sleep well. W  
conquered everything in our path thus far. I see no need to fail now."

o verify Her mother gave her a weak smile and closed her eyes. "Rest w  
or how courageous one. Tomorrow is another battle."

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will be invalid if you do not use your full legal name?” Mama plucked at the bedcovers and shook her head, growing noticeably more agitated. “I do not wish my grandchildren saddled with the titles of bastards.”

“I will think of something.” Celia hugged herself and felt more frustrated than she had before entering the room. She hadn’t thought of those things even though she knew them as well as Mama. What was wrong with her? How could she hope to hide the truth from Elias when she couldn’t even effectively navigate this first twist in the plot?

“You must tell him, Celia.”

“If I tell him, I will lose him.” Celia covered her face as more tears burned down her face. “I cannot bear the thought of losing him, Mama. I love him.”

Her mother released another heavy sigh. “I am so sorry, my child.”

Sniffing, Celia searched in vain for the handkerchief she always kept tucked into her stays. “Why are you sorry?”

“I am sorry because I thought I was protecting you, but instead, I imprisoned you.” Mama reached into her nightstand, withdrew a fresh handkerchief, and handed it to Celia. “I am sorry, my precious child. I swear to you I never meant you any harm.” She laced her fingers together and rested her hands on top of her blankets. “Tell him, daughter. Tell him everything. Lord Raines appears to be the sort who might know of a way to undo this harm I have brought down upon you.”

The pain and sorrow in her mother’s voice cut through Celia’s heart. She had to be strong, for Mama’s sake—figure this mess out and resolve it so it didn’t make her mother’s journey to the grave any faster. “I love you, Mama, and I’m proud to be your daughter. You came up with a way to protect me, and now it’s my turn to protect you.”

She leaned over and kissed her mother’s cheek. “Sleep well. We have conquered everything in our path thus far. I see no need to fail now.”

Her mother gave her a weak smile and closed her eyes. “Rest well, my courageous one. Tomorrow is another battle.”



## CHAPTER NINE

“**Y**OU CANNOT AVOID him forever.” Frannie sat cross-legged on Celia’s

“And your mother refuses to lie any more to Lord Raines about feeling unwell.” Sophie perched in front of the headboard, slightly rocking as she hugged her knees. “Maman said the poor man is beside himself with worry. This is not fair to him, Celia.”

“If I see him, he is sure to want more information to secure the license.” Celia also sat cross-legged on the bed, indulging in the unladylike position since it was just the three of them in their nightgowns. They had gathered before dawn to ensure the utmost privacy. “Maman applied her with questions and is very frustrated that he could not get His Holiness the Archbishop of Canterbury to cooperate until more information and more coin, I am sure—is provided.”

“A special license would eliminate the waiting for all the banns to be read and the fuss of a church wedding. Very thoughtful of him, I say, considering your mother’s health. With that license, you could marry here at the house in a matter of days.” Frannie glanced over at the closed bedroom door and leaned forward and lowered her voice. “And in my opinion, sooner would be better, since you and he...” She rolled her eyes. “What if you are concerned?” Her concerned gaze dropped to Celia’s middle. “Sooner is better because you could not be ignored in the hopes of it going away.”

Even though Celia agreed with Frannie’s uncomfortably valid point, she didn’t need to be bashed over the head with the reminder. “Lecturing me does not enhance my ability to decide what to do.”

“I fear Frannie’s argument holds merit,” Sophie said. “And you have always been the most pragmatic of us, Celia. Now is not the time to lose the power of reason and cower in your rooms.”

Celia dropped her head into her hands, wishing she could snap her fingers and make all these complications go away. She loved Elias. Just thinking about him made her breathless, and it wasn’t merely a matter of

longing. He had snuck into her heart and taken control of it even before this lovely night in the garden.

A heavy sigh escaped. "I cannot imagine what he will do when I tell him the truth. He is a solicitor. If it were discovered that he knowingly supported such a fraud, it would end his career, and a man's career is his identity and everything." She covered her eyes and rocked in place, ready to scream at the fact that it would rouse the entire household. She let her hands fall to her bed. "and slowly shook her head. "For his sake, I should release him and send him on his way." Her heart threatened to break as she decided what she needed to do. "Since I truly love him, I should let him go. And then all our lives will be safe."

"But what if a child is on the way?" Frannie reminded her in a special whisper.

Celia almost bared her teeth in anger. "Then I will finally have someone in my life whom I cannot harm by loving them."

"No." Sophie reached over and gently squeezed Celia's shoulder. "I have to tell him the truth and give him a chance. He has the right to choose—and she gently shook her. "Love is not so easily found and should never be given away so lightly. Remember your mother and Master Hodgely? The lord and lady bore all their lives? Tell him, Celia. It is the only way. If you are considering marriage register as Celia Bening, the union will be void because that is your legal name. I would think discovering such a thing after the wedding, then would upset him more than hearing the truth before."

"And you know he won't leave if you simply send him away with your explanation," Frannie said. "He is intractable. Remember?"

Celia held up her hands to quiet them. "If he comes to call today, I will not avoid him—but I am not saying that I won't attempt to stall him. I can think of a way to offer up my explanations in the proper light."

"Proper light?" Frannie repeated, her tone dubious. "Exactly what kind of light softens a lie?"

Celia cut her a hard glare. "Tell me, Frannie, when you decide to choose your husband, as you said you eventually would, how will you tell him that the Marquess of Ardsmere was never real?"

"Mine will be easy. I shall simply kill him off and become his widow."

"You are a virgin," Celia snapped. "Or do you plan on dispensing with your lustful that so as not to have to explain it?"

re their “Sisters!” Sophie interrupted them with a sharp clap. “Turning c  
other solves nothing.” She glared at them both. “Whatever we decide,  
ell himband together and support one another. Agreed?”

pported Filled with immediate regret, Celia took hold of Frannie’s  
ty—his “Forgive me, I beg you. I am as feral as a cornered animal.”

n if not Frannie smiled and twitched a sheepish shrug. “Forgive *me*, dear  
ds dropshould not have spoken so harshly about this troubling mess.”

nd him Celia scooted off the bed, went to the wardrobe, and opened its  
eded todoors. “I suppose we should all dress and prepare ourselves for the day  
secrets “How do you manage without your maid?” Sophie hopped off  
and shook the wrinkles out of her nightdress.

hissing “Berta comes by after she finishes with Mama.” Celia select  
favorite morning dress, the white muslin with the tiny blue flowers a  
omeonetrism. “After all, it would seem quite unusual for the duchess’s compa  
have her own lady’s maid.”

n. “You “Too true,” Frannie agreed. “We can help with your stays and b  
hoose.” She cast a glance at the window. The new day was making itself know  
be casta soft, pinkish light that gently eased into the room. “After all, it  
elinessearly.”

ign that “Early is best for privacy,” Celia said. “And if you wouldn’  
it is nohelping, that would be lovely. I fear Berta gets little rest because she  
eddingover Mama so.” She bowed her head and hugged her clothes. “I don’  
what will happen to poor Berta after...” She couldn’t finish beca  
with noinevitable was so unbearable. A deep breath and a hard swallow help  
get back on track. She turned to them and managed a smile. “Yo  
7, I willwould be much appreciated.”

until I It took no time at all to dress with Sophie and Frannie’s help, an  
was grateful for their company. Her dear friends kept her from wallow  
sort ofself-pity.

With her hair pinned up in the simple braided bun she prefer  
hoose adescended to the garden while the others finished dressing and tended  
that themorning correspondence and selection of engagements for the day.  
much too early for breakfast, but a cup of the rich coffee she loved alo  
ow.” the rising sun filling the garden might help her sort her thoughts and f  
ing withacceptable plan.

She prudently avoided the bench beside the water feature. Toc

on each memories there. She would not only become overly warm, but the at we will entertain a logical thought would leave her. Instead, she seated herself at a small table on the opposite side of the garden, tucked away in a corner behind the hedges. As she sipped her drink, she tried to calm herself, concentrating on the vibrant song of a little wren flitting among the leafy branches in search of a place to nest or perhaps find its morning meal.

The sound of footsteps made her turn and discover Gransdon appearing at the double extremely apologetic and out of sorts.

“Forgive me, Miss Bening, but Lord Raines is here.” The butler’s words clearly relayed his opinion regarding early-morning visits. “It reminded his lordship of the hour and how irregular you might find her calling at this time, but he insists and refuses to leave the premises and blue would you have me do?”

The calm instilled by the busy little wren immediately left her pulled in a deep breath and forced a smile she didn’t feel. “It is all right, Gransdon. He is welcome to join me here in the garden. You might also mention I would like a morning coffee or chocolate, since breakfast won’t be served until a bit later this morning. Is that all right?”

Gransdon nodded, then disappeared back inside.

Moments later, Elias strode into the garden and knelt at her side. “How are you? He gently touched her cheek as if fearing she would disappear. “Do you feel your health fully restored? I have been so worried.”

“I am quite improved.” Although the fluttering of her heart made it difficult to speak. She had longed to see him so much, even though her separation was no one’s fault but her own. “I have missed you so much.” She whispered.

Before she could think of anything else to say, he leaned up and pressed his lips to hers in a kiss filled with the same yearning she felt coursing through her veins.

“And I have missed you, my precious lioness.” He kissed her again, she even more passionate wistfulness.

If he kept this up, she wouldn’t be able to think of anything but his arms. It was for the sake of her sanity, and the ability to convince him that her mother weren’t the worst sort of people, she gently pushed against his arms while tugging upward on his arms.

“You will soil your clothes on the damp ground. Please—sit with me.” She lowered her voice and treated herself to a loving caress of his

ility to shaven face. "There are far too many bustling about for us to end up  
f at the grass again."

ircle of He dragged a chair closer while still firmly holding her hand. "I s  
ting on you are right." He glanced back at the open doors of the dining room  
arch of did let you know I called twice before?"

"Of course." She eased her hand free of him as a footman appear  
pearing tea. "You do not enjoy coffee or chocolate?"

"Never developed a taste for either. I prefer tea to start my day."  
huffing "So, you are aware of the hour," she teased.

ors. "I Mischief, mirth, and pride flashed in his eyes. "I see I have put Gr  
ind his out of sorts again. Did he call me a doddering rake?"

s. What "Gransdon would never stoop to name calling, and I am quite sure  
recover." She treated herself to another sip of coffee, wishing it was c  
: Celia ten o'clock, so they might enjoy the distraction of breakfast with the  
ll right, the household. As it was, it was barely a quarter to seven, and no one  
sk if he be down for the morning meal before nine thirty. The maids and f  
e for a bustled everywhere to prepare for the day, but Mama and everyone els  
the time before breakfast in their sitting rooms, attending to correspo  
and other matters. "And what would you have done if no one had bee  
'Celia.' from their rooms yet and willing to receive you?"

Is your "Sat on the front steps until Gransdon became so mortified  
allowed me to enter and wait in the library until someone came down.'  
nade it Celia couldn't help but smile at the thought of Elias perched on th  
gh their steps like a beggar. But as he pulled a folded paper out from the inner  
s," she of his coat, her smile became more difficult to maintain. "What ha  
there?" She suspected it to be the special license, which would be a d  
treated because it wouldn't bear her legal name.

r veins. Elias frowned. "Sadly, not what I wish it was. The Archbis  
in with Canterbury was a friend of my father and, therefore, not a friend of  
my brother." He unfolded the paper and smoothed it out on the tabl  
eing in once I list all the particulars necessary, he will be hard-pressed to refi  
hat she since I am quite well thought of at the Doctors' Commons."

d away "Particulars?" She hid behind her cup, pretending to sip agai  
though nothing remained but bitter dregs.

th me." He glanced at the entrance to the dining room, then turned back  
clean-with a brow arched to a perturbed angle. "I need your full name, Celia

o in the enough, the duchess was not inclined to share it.” He snorted a  
amusement. “Her Grace gave me the distinct impression that she app  
suppose our match. So, for the life of me, I cannot understand why she ref  
. “They share your legal name.”

Celia knew very well why. Mama was determined *not* to be the  
ed with explain everything to the inquisitive Lord Raines. Adopting a secret  
she looked all around, acting as though she were afraid to be overhear  
name troubles Her Grace,” she said quietly, “because it is the same  
daughter’s.”

ansdon “The same as her daughter’s?” Elias repeated. His perturbed scowl  
to a sharper look. “Your name is *Cecelia* rather than *Celia*?”

he will “My mother always called me *Celia*.” That was a truth, albeit a  
loser too obscured one. “So, it only seemed natural for Her Grace to use that  
rest of since she and her daughter do not currently agree on several matters  
e would relationship is quite unsteady at the moment.” That was somewhat tru  
ootmen had been up to Celia, they never would have left Germany. But, of  
se spent then she and Elias never would have met. Thank the stars Mar  
ndence persevered. Or maybe not—depending on the success or failure of the  
n down conversation.

“I see.” He eyed her, his expression uncomfortably readable. He  
that he believe a word of her version of the truth, and she didn’t blame him.  
, quite possibly the poorest tale she had ever told.

ie front “My full name is Cecelia Elizabeth Madeline Rose Bening.” She  
pocket the surname of Tutcliffe and tried to recall if all her names were  
ive you anywhere other than her christening records at the church in Germany  
lisaster, as she knew, they were not.

“Cecelia Elizabeth Madeline Rose Bening,” Elias repeated, his  
hop of eyed thoughtfulness more than a little disturbing.

nine or “Yes.” She folded her hands in her lap and tried to smile. “But I re  
e. “But prefer *Celia*.”

use me, “Might we go to the library so you can write it down to ensure I  
correct spelling when I file for the license?” His tone made her t  
n even wasn’t exactly cold, but it was most definitely suspicious.

“Of course.” She rose and led the way, her mind a whirl, searching  
to her possible way that this could be a misstep. After unlocking the libra  
. Oddly with the key hanging from the chatelaine pinned to the wide blue



huff of belted at her waist, Celia hurried to the window and drew back the drapes to improve the light before she lit the candle on the desk.

used to “I would have thought the maids would have already been in here meandered deeper into the room, eyeing the banked hearth and the red one too of draperies waiting to be drawn.

ive air, “Mrs. Harcourt misplaced their key,” she lied. “And they have yet to find it. “My another. Mine is currently the only one.”

as her “Why not leave it unlocked?”

“Her Grace prefers it locked, since this is where she keeps important papers she brought from Germany.” Somewhat of a truth, but more like a lie.

Celia swallowed hard to keep from groaning. Lying to Elias had become slightly almost painful. She lit a second candle and held out her hand. “Do you want me to write on your paper or use a fresh piece of parchment?”

3. Their He placed it in her hand. “Please do write on this paper. There is no need for a seal. If it is enough for your name and birth date directly below mine.”

course, She took a seat, signed, then filled out the date, February 7, 1794. Since she had wafted the paper to dry the ink rather than using sand, she stared at her current handwriting, knowing if the special license listed that name, the marriage would be void. Rather than hand it to Elias, she placed it back on the desk and didn't and stared down at it.

. It was “Celia?”

She refused to look up at him. The way he said her name roared in her ears. She knew she was a liar, and this paper was just the trap he needed to prove it. “Yes, Elias?”

. As far “Is there something else you wish to tell me?”

Her hands slowly closed into fists on either side of the paper as she narrowed her head and leveled her gaze with his. “Nothing that I am sure you have already surmised.” She drew in a deep breath and released it with a heavy sigh. “Perhaps it would be better if you told me.”

“Why do you not wish anyone to know that you are Lady Cecilia?” She used to restlessly paced back and forth in front of the desk, reminding her yet another sense. It was of the great panther confined in the cage at Hamburg.

She decided to answer with a question of her own. “How long has it been known?”

ry door “I suspected it the first day we met.” He leaned across the desk, spreading his large hands on its top as if he was about to vault over it. “You know I

“...aperiesduchess share a remarkable resemblance.” He slowly shook his head. “...subterfuge makes no sense.”

“...” Elias “I did not wish to be plagued with any concerns other than my nainderand her health,” she said, knowing that to be only a small part of the t... refuse to be bothered with being presented at court, visiting the mod... t to getgowns, or enduring ridiculous visits from those only interested... exorbitant dowry and my ability to birth them an heir.” She lifted h... “Celia, the companion to Her Grace, has a great deal more freedo... importantLady Cecilia, daughter of the fifth Duke of Hasterton.”

...e a lie. “Not every young woman attending the Season is required to con... becomehe argued with frustrating accuracy. “You would not have been fo... ou wishparticipate in any of those things you mentioned.”

“You are quite incorrect, my lord, and you know it. A duke’s daug... s spaceeligible age? Visiting from Germany? Her first time in London, and... does not wish to present herself to the *ton*? The gossips would have p... . Whileon such oddness and feasted upon it for weeks. Whispers and looks... l at herhave plagued us everywhere we went and ruined Mama’s visit.”

...marriage “Fine. Then when did you plan on telling me?” The eerie quietnes... re desktoone frightened her. It was dangerous and filled with anger. “You didn... that the man you gave yourself to and promised to marry had a right t... your true identity? What else do I need to know about you, my lady?”

...that he She drew her fists down into her lap and glared up at him, refu... rove it.look away. Now was the time to sever the tie and save him from ruin l... of her. “All else you need to know, my lord, is that I release you fro... promise.” Blast her eyes. They burned with the tears that her heart sc... ie liftedfor her to shed. But she could not. “Now, please take your leave and... ave notbe bothered with this household any longer. Mama and I have decided... a heavyfurther legalities shall be handled by our solicitor in Germany.” She

...harder and faster, refusing to release the tears. “After all, Mama will... ia?” Heto rest in Germany, and that is more my home than London could ev... t againto be.”

“Is that what you truly wish, *my lady*?” He towered over her with... ive youbut the too-narrow mahogany desk between them.

She forced a cruel smile. “Your tone betrays you, my lord. Is t... playingwhat you wish?”

and the He reached out and cupped her chin in his hand. “No, Celia. You

. “Your first. And I want the truth this time.”

“We are a mistake that would be better resolved by separating rather than making it worse by matrimony.” Her eyes burned, and her throat ached with rage. “I need to sob. Her heart dropped like a stone into the pit of her stomach. I must release you, Elias, and I apologize for wasting your time.”

in my When his hand dropped away from her, she should have escaped through the back door, but she didn’t. The struggle to hold the act together took everything she had. She sat there staring up at him, hoping that since she was so powerless to move, he would leave in her place.

He didn’t. Elias rounded the desk, grabbed her up by the shoulder, and forced her to look at him. “You apologize for wasting my time?” He yanked her closer and locked his arms around her. “You consider what we should do about the matter of waste?”

She had no words and tried to look away, but he wouldn’t allow it. He buried his fingers into her thick braid and held her head tilted back, forcing her to look up at him to witness the wildness and hurt in his eyes.

“I release you,” she repeated softly, helpless to say anything more. “I do not release you,” he said in a low growl. “You not only gave your word but sealed the promise with your body. I do not take such things so lightly.”

“It is for your own good,” she said, thankful for a sudden burst of indignation restoring her ability to speak. He might own her heart, but she would not be his prisoner. “Save yourself, my lord. Trust me when I say I am yours for the best.”

“Tell me the truth!” he roared. “Tell me why!”

The library door burst open. Friedrich charged in and pulled Elias against the wall. Elias rounded on the man and punched him in the face. Blood splattered from Friedrich’s nose.

“Stop this at once!” Celia shoved between them, one hand on Friedrich’s chest, the other held out to keep Friedrich at bay. “Friedrich, it is a matter of honor. Lord Raines and I were merely having a very heated discussion.”

“Shall I see him out, my lady?” The hulking blond footman took a threatening step toward Elias. “To the door with him—yes?”

“I am sure Lord Raines can find his way out all by himself,” she said, shocked but thankful for the calm numbness that had settled across her mind. “I would tend to your nose, Friedrich, and thank you for responding when you were called.”

me in distress.”

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with theer long for home and simpler times.

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She kept her hand on Elias’s chest until Friedrich left the room and clc  
out the door behind him. Then she turned and faced Elias, determined to ma  
ing she leave and never come back. “We cannot marry. It would mean the en  
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v it. He out like a spent candle. Does nothing but create torment and pain.” She  
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He caught her close and tried to kiss her, but she turned aw  
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r things pain that she had to hold her breath to keep from sobbing. After what  
forever, he shook his head and backed toward the door. “This is no  
urst of Celia. I do not go quietly, and I always return. Remember that, my lov  
but she Celia held herself locked in place. Chin up. No expression.  
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Elias stormed out of the library and slammed the door behind him.  
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Elias’s again. Allowing oneself to *feel* had proven to be the greatest of errors.  
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never being born.

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re said,  
er. “Go  
thought

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“Are you certain, my lady?” The footman’s thick German accent made her long for home and simpler times.

“Positive, thank you. See to yourself now. That nose looks quite bad.” She kept her hand on Elias’s chest until Friedrich left the room and closed the door behind him. Then she turned and faced Elias, determined to make him leave and never come back. “We cannot marry. It would mean the end of all you have worked so hard to attain. I will not be responsible for your ruin. Nor will I watch you come to hate me. Now, go.”

“I love you,” he said with his teeth bared like a cornered animal. “And I know you love me.”

She huffed a bitter laugh. “Love is a wicked demon sent to curse the weak into believing it will save everything and last forever. But then it fails. Burns out like a spent candle. Does nothing but create torment and pain.” She shook her head and pointed at the door. “Save yourself, Elias, and be thankful I freed you from this slow death.”

He caught her close and tried to kiss her, but she turned away. He dropped his arms from around her, stepped back, and glared at her with such pain that she had to hold her breath to keep from sobbing. After what felt like forever, he shook his head and backed toward the door. “This is not over, Celia. I do not go quietly, and I always return. Remember that, my love.”

Celia held herself locked in place. Chin up. No expression. Hands tightened into fists. She would not react and betray the utter desolation tearing her to pieces.

Elias stormed out of the library and slammed the door behind him.

Only then did she drop to the floor right where she stood. On her knees, she hugged herself and rocked back and forth with tears streaming down her face. She made no sound, just wept in silence and swore to herself—never again. Allowing oneself to *feel* had proven to be the greatest of errors. Such a fool she was. Such a lonely, misbegotten fool that would have been better off never being born.



## CHAPTER TEN

“I WANT TO know everywhere they go before they even think about there.” Elias fixed a stern glare on Jack Portney, willing the Bow Runner to understand the severity of the request.

Mr. Portney accepted the task with a curt dip of his chin. “It will be my lord. Several reliable contacts now exist within the household. I will keep you informed on a regular basis—hourly, if necessary.”

“Good man.” Elias dismissed him with a nod and returned his attention to the paper Celia had signed with everything but her title and surname. He had suspected her identity from the beginning but wanted so badly to trust her that he had believed she would never deceive him, that he had shoved his suspicion aside. Never again would he make the mistake of going against his instincts.

And now he would solve the rest of his precious lioness’s mystery. She had released him with the excuse that she had tired of toying with a son, a solicitor, he *might* have accepted her reason at face value. He had thrown his head with a hard shake and thrown himself back in the chair. No. He would not have accepted that reason either. Heartache had filled her eyes along with that same strange leeriness he had noticed the first time they met. She loved him as much as he loved her. Celia was his, and he would win her back by obliterating whatever foolishness she had spouted about refusing to ruin him. How? He could not be ruined.

“But she very well could be,” he muttered. What if she carried his secret? Yet another reason to solve this riddle and convince her to marry him. Would he abandon his own or be a cruel, heartless bastard like his father? He picked up the slip of paper and slowly rubbed his thumb back and forth across her flowery signature. “What is your secret, Lady Cecilia? What web of lies you have woven?”

His brother, Aurelias Montseton Raines, fourth Duke of Altrincham, came into the office without the courtesy of knocking. “Your summons s

both urgent and slightly rude, little brother.” He softened the accusation with an affectionate smile as he dropped into the chair facing Elias’s desk. “Sorry, but this sorry business has you so crusty?”

Elias ignored Monty’s usual flippancy. “You are widely traveled. Have you ever crossed paths with the Duke of Hasterton?”

“Hasterton, you say?” Monty scowled as he pondered the question. “No, I have not. I shall shake his head. “I don’t believe anyone has, old man. Why?”

“He is my client, yet never responds to correspondence unless he is in the city. His dying mother had me draw up her last will and testament to leave her worldly goods to her devoted companion, Miss Celia Bening. As soon as it was done, to the dowager duchess, her son was much too busy to escort her to London. I shall go for a final visit, and her daughter’s frail health prevented her from coming also.” Elias leaned forward and thumped the desk. “Her Grace also exacted an oath from me to protect and love Miss Bening, who I have discovered is, in fact, her daughter, the Lady Cecilia.”

Monty squinted as if sorting through all Elias had just said causing him physical pain. He straightened in the chair, then leaned forward. “Her Grace’s companion is actually her daughter?”

Elias nodded. “Why would her daughter pose as a companion?” Monty grimaced. “Unpleasant?” Elias snorted. “Only in attitude. Her beauty is nothing to compare, yet she is the most stubborn, infuriating, unreasonable woman I have ever met.”

“And you love her,” Monty observed with a shrewdness only a little brother could possess. “Yes, damn you.” Elias raked his hands through his hair. “And she loved me. I even applied for a special license so we could marry. Never death claims her mother.” Another disgusted snort escaped him. “Of course, that was when *Miss Bening* revealed her true identity and decided to send me packing with the claim that she refused to be responsible for this ruin.”

“Your ruin?”

“Yes, and she would not elaborate on how exactly that might have happened.” Elias threw himself back in the chair again and scrubbed a hand across his forehead. “How the devil could the woman possibly ruin me?” He gripped the chair arms.

“Yes, damn you.” Elias raked his hands through his hair. “And she loved me. I even applied for a special license so we could marry. Never death claims her mother.” Another disgusted snort escaped him. “Of course, that was when *Miss Bening* revealed her true identity and decided to send me packing with the claim that she refused to be responsible for this ruin.”

“Your ruin?”

“Yes, and she would not elaborate on how exactly that might have happened.” Elias threw himself back in the chair again and scrubbed a hand across his forehead. “How the devil could the woman possibly ruin me?” He gripped the chair arms.

“Yes, damn you.” Elias raked his hands through his hair. “And she loved me. I even applied for a special license so we could marry. Never death claims her mother.” Another disgusted snort escaped him. “Of course, that was when *Miss Bening* revealed her true identity and decided to send me packing with the claim that she refused to be responsible for this ruin.”

on withteeth, then made up his mind to confess all to his trusted brother. “I  
“Whatthat could be ruined if our evening in her garden results in more than a  
night of pleasure.”

l. Have Monty cringed and slowly shook his head. “You never do things h  
do you, little brother?”

m, then “Apparently not.” Elias yanked open his bottom desk drawer, pulled  
bottle and a pair of glasses, and poured them both a drink. “I love her,  
nitiatesand I mean to solve this infuriating puzzle and make her my wife.”

ave all “What do you need from me?”

ording “Do you know of anyone who has met Hasterton? Has the ma  
Londonwarmed his seat in the House of Lords? I have been unable to find  
comingwho personally knows the man, but your connections cast a much wi  
tractedthan mine.”

e since Monty shook his head again. “The man is an enigma. Never s  
known to be the shrewdest businessman and investor London has ever  
ed himour time. Do you know I even heard he devised a system of shops all  
Grace’sthe Continent? And every single one of them is a roaring success. A  
the same business model, and all are run by women. Some  
combination tea and biscuit book shops or some such nonsense. I  
ed. “Isrecall the details about that particular venture, but according to the  
minister, anything Hasterton touches turns to gold.” He sampled the v  
beyondgave an appreciative nod, then took a deeper sip. “As his solicitor, yo  
oman lthe extent of his successes. You know the man’s wealth, and his at  
ferret out yet another success.” Monty turned thoughtful. “Do you r  
elovedget the man to force his sister to marry you? Is he her guardian?”

“She is of legal age.” Elias tapped on the date beside Celia’s nam  
he saidtwin, in fact. Both are three and twenty.”

before Monty leaned forward, his mouth sagging open. “You are telling  
But, ofcunning fellow who is probably richer than Croesus by now is a mer  
ided toand twenty?”

for my “Yes.” Elias wouldn’t go into detail about Hasterton’s wealth,  
dowager duchess and the young duke had done quite well with the  
increasing it several times over.

occur.” “What about your man, Mr. Portney? Has he been able to d  
ross hisanything?” Monty slid his glass onto the desk but shook his head whe  
tted hisoffered to freshen it. “He’s the best of the Bow Street Runners. Ever



It is her than old Elkins.”

“I have had him on the case for a while. So far, nothing.” Elias tilted the whisky in the glass. The way the golden liquid caught the light halfway, he thought. “It is almost as if the duke does not exist.”

“I know quite a few individuals down at the Exchange who would be glad to differ. The man’s every move is watched and mimicked in the house of Monty, reaping at least a portion of his successes.”

“Yet the only servants or employees willing to offer us information to him are those most recently hired for his London townhouse. And even if I have never seen him.” Elias slowly shook his head, then lifted his gaze to anyone his glass and settled it on his brother. “I love Celia, and she will be miserable if she does not see Monty returned a sympathetic look. “We will work this out, brother. I swear it.” His expression of sympathy furrowed into a studious frown. “I have seen you but Bournebridge mentioned spotting you in the park the other day.” His expression slowly shifted to an amused smirk. “Quite beside herself, she was, but I am sure across neither she nor her cackling hens-in-waiting could identify the two of you. I will have you treated to a ride in that fine barouche I gave you.”

Elias smiled at the memory. “The raven-haired goddess was my first love. I cannot say the fetching redhead was Lady Sophie, sister to the fourth Duke of Rydleshire. I believe the Rydleshires spend most of their time in France. I have seen her with the dowager duchess and Celia have spent the lion’s share of their time in Germany.” He cocked his head and arched a meaningful brow. “An acquaintance to Sophie is unattached.”

“Our task at hand is to get you married, dear brother. Not me.” Elias tapped on the desktop again. “Lady Whitfield’s dinner party is this evening. “His An intimate gathering of sixteen to twenty persons, as I understand. I would like to receive a card for it? I know her husband thinks quite highly of you after the handling of that rather delicate affair for him last year.”

Elias glanced at the basket on the corner of his desk. It overflowed with messages and cards in dire need of attention. “I have yet to sort through the correspondence from the past few days.” He dismissed the issue with a wave of his hand. “I fail to see how Lady Whitfield’s soiree is relevant to my dilemma with Celia.”

“According to Fords, the aforementioned Lady Sophie and the dowager duchess, Countess of Rydleshire, Lady Ardsmere, and her mother-in-law, can be discovered in a better dowager Duchess of Hasterton and your Lady Cecilia will be in atten-

Monty preened like a peacock and added a wink for good measure. “How the deuce did your valet come by such information?” he wondered if he should hire Fords to discover more about Celia rather than Mr. Portney.

“Fords knows I prefer to read the table before I take part in the games,” Monty fiddled with his gloves. “It’s open season on eligible bachelors, and the marriage-minded mothers are cunning and relentless. One must be prepared before treading such dangerous grounds.” He twitched a keen eye. “Servants know everything. One must simply listen.” He nodded to the overflowing basket of envelopes. “Dig for the card, dear brother. What place to observe and haunt your elusive Lady Cecilia than when she is trapped at a dinner party?”

Elias shuffled through the papers, tearing open seals and scanning the frownsheets for the gist of the contents and the sender. He paused long enough to toss a handful of the unopened ones into Monty’s lap. “Make your loves useful.”

Monty joined in but moved at a slower pace. One of the notes grabbed Celia’s interest. He leaned forward and stroked his chin, enraptured by the Earl of page missive. “I had no idea he had that many illegitimate children.” “Monty!” Elias snatched it out of his hands and set it aside. “Fords lives in Whitfield invite—not fodder for gossip at the club.”

“We do not gossip.”

“You lie. I have witnessed it.” Elias looked closer at the words scribbled across the note in his hand. “Here. Found it.” Now that he had confirmed he was officially invited, he could more effectively plan his attack. He did you up from the invitation. “You do plan to attend, yes?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world now,” Monty said. “You have my interest regarding my future sister-in-law. Shall I come by and fetch you when heavy rains appear to be the way of it today?”

“Yes, I fear the barouche offers little protection against the weather,” Elias shrugged. Elias refolded the card and tucked it safely into the inner pocket of his waistcoat. “I shall be ready at a quarter past eight. That should enable us to arrive at an opportune time that is also acceptable to our hostess. I shall send my regards to the Whitfields immediately.”

“We shall arrive early enough to watch for the arrival of those friends from the Hasterton household.” Monty rose, donned his hat and gloves, then

again. "You shall be married before the month is out, dear brother. Elias fear." As he sauntered toward the door, he glanced back and proudly over his chest. "And I shall be an exemplary uncle who spoils his nephews and nieces with the finest of gifts."

game." "Let us not get ahead of ourselves." Elias gathered his hat, gloves, and satchel, and followed his brother out of the office and the building.

Carefully "Care for a ride?" Monty paused with his foot on his carriage's step, knowing Elias glanced up at the overcast sky. The heavy bank of grayness

did at the ready to split open and pour. "I would, actually. Thank you very much, it better

When they came to a stop in front of his modest home, he turned to his brother. "Thank you."

For once, Monty became quite serious. "You can always depend on me, I hope you know that."

Enough to "I do, and it is much appreciated." Elias alighted from the carriage, closed the door, then thumped on it before vaulting up his front steps and heading inside.

Hebed his Mrs. Camp met him in the entry hall with a look of surprise. "I'm multi-early, my lord? Not feeling poorly, I hope?"

"I am quite well, Mrs. Camp, but I forgot to tell you I shall be going out this evening. Please have Henry ready the bath, and I shall require an evening dress seen to, of course." An amused huff escaped him as he

"It may be in need of a good dusting." Elias rarely made it a point to attend such parties unless it would improve a relationship with a client. To

med he however, he needed to impress upon Celia that he would not go quietly. He glanced wherever she went, he would be there as well.

Mrs. Camp sprang into action, gathering his hat, gloves, and satchel. She

piqued him. She waddled down the hallway at an impressive speed, considering her generous girth. "Right away, my lord," she called back without slowing

shall have Henry shine your good leather shoes once he finishes carrying your weather." water. I know you'll not wish to wear your Hessians with your coat.

is dress." If Wellington had troops as efficient and lively as Mrs. Camp, the response would have ended ages ago. Elias didn't bother responding, since

the housekeeper had already disappeared downstairs to rally the troops—from the

as it were, since her son Henry was the only servant other than a maid who winked at her with the housekeeping. Jamison, the driver of his coach, lived ab

. Neverstable at the back of the house.

7 patted As Elias climbed the stairs, it struck him that he kept quite a beloved home. But as a bachelor and a worker of long hours, he didn't need any more. He halted on the landing, turned, and stared back downstairs at the sparse hall devoid of paintings, small tables, vases of fresh flowers, and other unnecessary items that merely created clutter and required dusting. He failed to see the need for such things.

looked As the daughter of a very affluent family, Celia came from opulent excess—the best of everything. While he did quite well at the firm, he failed to provide her with such a lifestyle. Was that the true reason she had spurned him? Had she said she was protecting him from ruin to save him from ruin? He pulled in a deep breath and slowly whistled it out through clenched teeth. Now was not the time to second-guess himself. A deep knowing gnawed at him, insisted there was more to Celia's release than she had revealed. And while riches dripped from her name, she never behaved like a spoiled darling of the *ton* intent on showing everyone that only the very best satisfied her. After all, as *Celia the companion* had always dressed with a modest intent of not outshining the duchess. There was a worrisome mystery to be solved here, and he would rest until he untangled it.

added, The door to the servants' stair at the other end of the hall thumped with a loud bang. Henry ambled out of it, toting steaming buckets of water. "Sorry for the noise, my lord." The young man gave Elias an apologetic nod, and "I was paying more attention to not spilling than catching the door."

"Give me the buckets, lad, and you can run down and get more if you need to go to take them, but Henry backed up with a horrified look.

ing her "If Mother found out I let you carry the water..." The boy gave a shake of his head. "I'll not risk that sort of wrath, my lord. If you could get the dressing room door, though, that would be grand."

evening Elias crossed the bedroom, opened the door, and stepped aside, realizing that his black evening coat had already been brushed and placed on the wardrobe horse. His newest white shirt—one *without* ruffles, just the preferred—and his waistcoat waited there as well. His black trousers or *troop* across the foot of the bed. He often wondered if Mrs. Camp was a help because the woman had perfected the ability to move about the house with amazing speed and complete every task without being heard or seen.

freshly starched cravat was laid out on top of his dresser, as well as a modest drawers, stockings with their garters, and braces for his trousers.

As Henry hurried out for more water, Elias started shedding his clothes and pondering what Celia's reaction would be when she saw him. He wondered if the poor lady's health permitted them to attend, as Monty's valet reported. If the poor lady's day had not gone well, then all his preparations would be for naught.

"Think positive," he said aloud while approaching the one luxury he could indulge in—a metal tub large enough to stretch out his long legs. He had hopefully, someday, use for an amorous bath with Celia.

Either Henry or his mother had already lined the vessel with linen. A plume of steam rose from the small amount of water barely covering the bottom of the tub. A pair of kettles hanging over the fire in the dressing room's hearth were at the ready for rinsing or making the bathwater hotter.

Henry reappeared, red-faced and huffing for air as he emptied two buckets into the tub.

"Henry." Elias halted the lad as he grabbed up both buckets and started to dash back out. "Running is not necessary."

"Not according to Mother." With a knowing dip of his chin, he turned and ran for more.

Shaking his head, Elias settled down into the shallow water and started washing with a fresh bar of Pears soap. The clean scent of rosemary, lavender, and a slightly floral note filled the small room but failed to alleviate his tension as it usually did. Too much was at stake for him to relax. Celia's reaction would be the deciding factor.

Elias reached the Whitfields' and discovered whether Celia and her mother attended, his tense state would be easier managed. At least, he hoped so.

Henry continued toting water until it reached slightly above Elias's shoulders. Taking pity on the winded lad, Elias told him, "That'll do, Henry. If you need extra for rinsing, the kettles on the hearth will be just fine."

"Thank you, my lord." The young man bowed and quietly closed the door on his way out to keep the warmth in the room.

Elias finished bathing, scrubbed himself dry, then rubbed in his favorite scented oils of citrus, bergamot, and amber. Scents branded themselves on his ghost, one's memories, and he wanted Celia to think of him any time she passed these. She had placed the same curse upon him. To his dying day, whenever he happened upon the fragrance of jasmine, he would think of her.

is short After dressing, he sat on the bench at the foot of the bed and secured his freshly polished black shoes. He preferred boots, but that clothes would not do for a dinner party. He stood and eyed himself in the mirror. *If* he laughed. Father had often insulted him by saying he looked like the Prince of Darkness himself whenever he wore black. The somber shade accentuated his dark hair and the golden eyes he had inherited from his mother. His mother had made his father hate him even more.

Henry he “To the devil with you, Father.” He tipped a nod at his image in the mirror and marched out, more determined than ever to make this evening a success. Monty had mentioned marriage before the month was out. If Elias gave his consent. A hint about it, the union would take place within a matter of days. Without the knowledge of Celia’s true identity, there would be no questions impeding the small issue of the special license.

Mrs. Camp met him at the bottom of the stair. “I’ve brushed your hair and more and with the weather what it is, I thought your greatcoat would be in better use.” Her ever-amiable expression hardened into a slightly scolding, motherly one. “You should have worn it this morning. Even with it being spring, a sudden rain could be the death of you.”

Henry the boy “Yes, Mrs. Camp.” He’d learned long ago not to argue with his mother. The housekeeper. She only had the best of intentions, and he found comfort in her caring nature.

Henry thyme, “Shall I send Henry out to hire a coach?” She turned and frowned at the rain sluing down even harder across the panes of his window. “Once he has his barouche won’t be protection enough on a night like this.”

Henry mother Elias inwardly smiled. Mrs. Camp fretted about him drowning in the deluge but had no trouble tossing her son out into the storm for the sake of her employer. “That won’t be necessary. My brother should arrive soon. I need a coach.”

Henry Mrs. Camp beamed the round-cheeked smile of a young girl hoping to be noticed by a lad. “His Grace is too kind.”

Henry Elias tried not to roll his eyes. Monty had that effect on women, no matter their age, marital status, or social standing. “He is indeed.”

Henry es upon “I’ll have Henry watch for him. He knows His Grace’s coach.” Henry she came Before Elias could stop her, she’d hurried down the hallway bearing her son’s name. He checked his timepiece, then donned his hat, gloves, and gloves before opening the door and squinting out into the weather.

ired thealways arrived early, and there came his coach around the corner. Th  
simplywas nigh.

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always arrived early, and there came his coach around the corner. The battle was nigh.





## CHAPTER ELEVEN

ELIAS SUBTLY MANEUVERED around until he stood with his back to the wall, behind a section of chairs arranged for the pleasure of the guests. From a prime spot, he could easily carry on a polite conversation while watching Celia to arrive. Movement in the corner of his eye drew his attention to Whitfield flitting around the large room like a nervous butterfly, checking every detail before more guests appeared.

He and Monty *had* arrived unfashionably early. While it was regrettable, Elias was glad they were the first of what looked to be a sizable gathering. Monty's valet had guessed sixteen to twenty. From the lines of chairs arranged around the perimeter of the room and in sizable clusters in the center, a great deal more was expected.

The muffled rumbling of distant thunder concerned him. Worrying about the dowager duchess's frailness, he wondered if she and Celia would venture out on such a night. While he wished the woman no ill will, he hoped they would still risk it.

"I believe we arrived a touch too early," Monty remarked in a low voice. He subtly edged closer and nudged Elias. "You do realize you will be expected to move about the room and carry on at least a smattering of conversation with those in attendance?"

"I am aware." Elias kept his gaze locked on the archway leading to the next hall.

"Then stop watching the entrance like a leopard waiting to pounce." Monty caught hold of his coat sleeve and tugged him into motion. "Elias said loudly, then snorted with an obviously fake laugh. "You are not joking."

Elias spared his brother a curious glare. "What the deuce is wrong with you?"

Monty cut his eyes to the side, subtly directing Elias's attention to the host, who was blatantly staring at them with an irritated glower. The man

obviously not pleased about their early arrival.

Realizing they had noticed him, Lord Whitfield sprang into action, motioned for a servant just entering the room with a tray of drinks to Elias and Monty. “Your Grace, Lord Raines, I do apologize. You should have been offered drinks ages ago.”

“It is we who must apologize, Whitfield. I fear my punctuality and timeliness made us arrive quite early.” Monty accepted a glass and turned to Elias. “I have always suffered from over-punctuality. Have I not, brother?” “Indeed. Were my brother a condemned man, he would arrive early on this morning for his own hanging.” Elias accepted a glass, then almost snapped its stem to Lady Duchess of Hasterton and Celia entered the room. He attempted to make idle chatter even though he kept his gaze locked on Celia.

“You have been quite well, Whitfield? It has been a while since last we spoke.” Lord Whitfield turned to follow the line of his stare, then turned back to her with a smile. “Even illness has not diminished the dowager duress of your beauty.” He cast another nonchalant glance their way as the rest of the Hasterton household joined them. “My Daphne says that the lovely thing at Her Grace’s side is her companion, but the resemblance of the two is uncanny. Do you not agree? Surely, they must be relations.”

“Both are quite breathtaking,” Monty said. His overly appreciative remark would have made Elias consider elbowing him in the ribs. Hard.

Elias turned and set his drink on the wall’s narrow ledge running high around the room. “Her Grace is my client. I believe I shall go on now. I need to greet her.”

Celia turned and spotted him before he reached her. His precious expression looked poised to flee. A bright rosiness flared across her cheeks and flashed in her pale green eyes. It didn’t escape his notice that her hand latched on to her arm to prevent her from stepping away.

“Your Grace,” he said to the dowager with a heartfelt smile and a bow. “You braved the weather. I do hope that means the good days must be outnumbering the bad.”

Her resulting smile seemed genuine, filling him with relief. “I long for rain,” she said, “and it is quite good to see you again, Lord Raines.”

The weariness in her tone concerned him. He feared the lady was tiring herself too hard. “Thank you, Your Grace.” He cut a sharp look at Celia and then gently guided her back at the duchess. “I worried you might never wish to

again.”

The dowager’s smile turned sad. “As I said, it is quite good to see you again, Celia. I hope you will continue to serve me well.” Celia jutted her chin higher, and although she remained silent, the curls of her hair quivered with her trembling.

Elias offered her a bow. “And it is lovely to see you again, *Miss Bening*.” She returned a curtsy. “Lord Raines.”

As Monty joined them, Elias stepped to one side and inclined his head toward his brother. “Allow me to present my brother, His Grace, the Duke of Almsbury. Monty, this is Her Grace, the Duchess of Hasterton, and her companion, Miss Celia Bening.”

Celia curtsied deeply. The duchess held tightly to her cane and said, “Forgive me, Your Grace. I fear my days of managing a household are behind me.”

Monty gracefully accepted the apology by bowing to them both. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Grace. And you as well, Miss Bening.”

With a smile directed at Celia, he added, “Elias has told me a great deal about you. The feather in Celia’s hair quivered more noticeably. She turned to the duchess. “Shall we get you seated, Your Grace? Standing so long is quite wearying for you.”

“Allow me,” Elias said before Duchess Thea could answer. He stepped forward and offered his arm. As she took it, he leaned down and whispered into her ear, “I am waist-trying to keep my oath to you, Your Grace. Any assistance you could ever give would be most appreciated.”

She gave him a sad smile. “I fear that must be Celia’s choice.” With the slightest shake of her head, she added, “I wish it was mine to make for her. As he led her to a chair, he allowed himself a heavy sigh. “I am stubborn, Your Grace. This is not over until I decide it is.”

The duchess folded her hands in her lap and avoided looking him in the eyes. “Good luck to you, Lord Raines. I pray that I live to see you prosper in this endeavor.” Then she stared straight ahead, as though dismissing him.

Lady Sophie stepped in to block his way as he turned to go to Celia. “I still says *no*,” she whispered, with a sympathetic wrinkling of her nose. “I will see you away.”

“I do not wish to be rude,” he said with a smile to throw off Celia, then observing them. “But you would be well advised to step aside, Lady Sophie. I will see Celia will be mine.”

The lady made a face, then moved around him as though she were to greet another guest who had just arrived.

As Lady Ardsmere blocked his way and opened her mouth to speak, he gave her a warning glare and slightly shook his head.

She closed her mouth, stuck her nose high in the air, and joined her mother-in-law at the dowager duchess's side.

Celia edged a step back, glancing all around as if trying to decide the best direction in which to flee.

"Might I have a word, Miss Bening?" he said in the politest tone he could manage.

"I should see to Her Grace, my lord. Perhaps after dinner?" She smiled and nodded as more guests poured into the room.

"Her Grace is quite comfortable." He effectively herded Celia to the side until they reached a slightly secluded area beside the windows. It was a good spot for a quiet conversation, yet still open enough to the other guests. "Did you inform Her Grace that you refused to marry the man who adores you—the man you shared yourself with, I might add?" She pressed her mouth into a hard line and glared at him.

"Shall I take that as a yes?"

"Take it however you wish," she said coldly. "As I told you before, I am for the best." She glanced away and pressed her gloved fist to her forehead. After a quick sniff and a visible swallow, she gave him a look that said, "I do this because I love you," she said softly. "Please trust me."

"A strange request from the woman who refuses to trust me."

"I have trusted you with more than you realize." She gave him a look that made him grit his teeth. "Have a good evening, Lord Rainier. My conversation is over." She hurried away, sweeping across the room with the grace of a swan gliding across a waterway.

More guests filed into the room, closing her off from his sight.

Elias rolled his shoulders and stretched his neck, wishing he had a cravat so tightly. His tensed muscles ached, and he couldn't breathe. "Go to the need to chase after Celia, ranting and raging until she came to her senses. He sucked in a deep breath and hissed it out through clenched teeth, anyone struggling to regain a sense of calm. With the heavy rains, a walk out in the cool down was impossible.

"Any luck?" Monty appeared at his side and handed him another drink.

shed to “None whatsoever,” Elias answered sourly. He tasted the liquid, which smelled like port, then caught himself before revealing a grimace that he perceived as quite rude. “What is this ghastly stuff?”

“Not sure.” Monty lifted his glass and frowned at it while smacking his lips. “I believe it was port before they watered it down. They invited some bloody people to this incorrectly described *intimate* dinner party that he best probably feared running short. If Prinnie shows, as I heard that he might for their sakes, I do hope they offer him something better.”

“Might I suggest you run, dear brother?” Elias didn’t look at Monty, kept his gaze focused straight ahead.

“Why?”

“The odious Lady Bournebridge and her rather pinched-face daughter are right-headed this way, and I know they are *not* coming for me.”

When Monty failed to answer, Elias turned his way and discovered the door to be gone. He laughed and forced down another swallow of the disgusting drink. When they were children, Monty had often slipped past Nanny and the governesses to bring Elias the treats their father had always denied his son. It was good to know that his brother hadn’t lost his gift of being unseen nor heard.

As predicted, Lady Bournebridge puckered a fiercer scowl and her mouth midway with her daughter in tow. She gave Elias an unpleasant smirk that he assumed she meant as a smile, then grabbed her daughter’s hand and crossed the courtyard, parting the guests much as Almighty God had parted the Red Sea.

Elias took the opportunity to forge his way through the mingling crowd to rejoin the dowager duchess and Celia. The duchess still sat where she always sat. This placed her. Celia sat beside her, and the rest of the Hasterton entourage hovered nearby as though on guard. Placing himself in front of the duchess and Celia to keep the crowd from pressing in on them, he said with a bright smile, “Lovely gathering. Is it not?”

The duchess arched a cynical brow and resettled her fingers on the handle of her cane. “It is quite the gathering.” She turned to Celia, then tipped her head in Elias’s direction. “Do be a dear and fetch me some refreshment. With this many in attendance, I fear that the light repast we were promised might either fail to be served or completely run out before it reaches us. I am sure Lord Raines would be happy to go along to ensure you are not trampled in the crush.”

“I would, indeed.” Elias squared his shoulders and smiled, daring to

did that refuse.

It would Her eyes narrowed the slightest bit before she forced a polite

“Thank you, Lord Raines. Your assistance is most appreciated.”

ring his The dowager waved Lady Sophie’s mother out from behind the  
so many and patted Celia’s seat. “Hurry and sit, Nia, before we lose the chair.”

at they Elias laughed as he edged into the throng and cleared a path for  
ght, for When she reached his side, he casually extended his arm behind

protection but took care not to touch her in what anyone might perceiv  
ty. Just embrace. He cleared their way with his other arm, edging sideways un  
reached a long banquet table that had very little remaining in the way  
or drink.

After are “This is ridiculous,” he said for Celia’s ears alone. “Intimate dinne  
my eye. Hurry and snatch something for yourself and your mother.”

ed him Panic flared across Celia’s face, but she recovered quickly. “I sl  
ig port. something for *Her Grace*,” she said louder than necessary, then  
and the forward, snatched up a napkin, and started filling it with whatever sh  
second grab.

neither Elias felt like kicking himself. If anyone had overheard his mis  
referring to the duchess as Miss Bening’s mother, word would spread

halted than red wine spilled on fresh linen. “I shall fetch Her Grace somet  
that he drink, Miss Bening,” he called out loudly. “And one for yourself as we

changed She cast a nervous smile back at him, then forged onward, tr  
lea. gather up the meager pickings.

masses If the prince regent did show up, Lord and Lady Whitfield wo  
he had ruined even more than they already were by putting on such a dis  
tourage affair. Elias elbowed his way farther down the table and claimed the l  
uchess glasses of punch. He held them high to protect them from sloshing an  
forced his way back to Celia.

“The last two,” he said to her.

handle “Well done, you,” she said with such sincerity that his heart swell  
ped he held up the bulging napkin. “A bit of cheese and bread was all that w  
it. With but hopefully, it will be enough to keep Her Grace steady until we get

ed will By the time they worked their way back to the duchess, the poor la  
am sure fanning herself. Elias hurried to hand her the punch. “I am sorry it

d.” long, Your Grace.” The woman’s pallor concerned him. He bent clo  
Celia to whispered, “Shall I get you to a less crowded room?”

Celia knelt beside Duchess Thea and looked up into her face. ‘  
smile. order the carriages brought to the door immediately. You do not appear  
at all.’

the chairs “Do not fuss and draw attention,” the dowager told them both. She  
at the drink, then hugged the delicate cup to her chest and bowed her head  
for Celia. Elias decided to take matters into his own hands. “We are done  
her for Your Grace.” He flagged down Monty and gave him the signal that  
he as an worked out long ago that meant *time to leave*. Then he caught the attention  
until they a footman and waved the man over. “Her Grace’s carriages. To the  
of food door. Immediately.”

The man bobbed his head and took off as fast as the crowd  
for party, allowed.

“I did not tell you I was ready to leave, my lord,” the duchess said.  
hall get “I did not ask, Your Grace.” Elias held out his hand to help her  
shoved determined to get her out of the place before it did her ill.

he could The dowager took his hand, started to stand, then sagged like a worn  
sail.

take in Elias caught her as she fell forward and swept her up into his arms.  
d faster a path,” he bellowed. “Now!” He paused only long enough for Celia to  
thing to his side. The fear on her face made his heart ache. He prayed this was  
ill.” end. Not now. Not with so many watching. “I said clear the way! He  
ying to is not well.”

As he stepped into the far less crowded entry hall, Lady Whitfield  
could be forward and opened a side door. “Here! In here. You may lay Her Grace  
astrous here.”

at two The duchess’s eyes fluttered as though she fought to keep them open  
d made not let me die here,” she rasped.

Celia gave him a teary-eyed nod and tugged him toward the front  
“Her Grace wishes to leave,” she called to Lady Whitfield.

ed. She “My carriage already awaits,” Monty said as he yanked open the  
was left, door. “Take it.”

home.” “Your things, Lord Raines!” Lady Whitfield shrieked, revealing her

idly was “Give them to my brother,” Elias shouted without looking back. I  
took so as he stepped out into the rain, trying to shield the duchess as much  
ser and could. He clambered up into the carriage and eased down into the seat  
her, keeping her propped upright as much as possible.

“I shall     The coachman helped Celia enter. She slid in next to Elias and dra  
ar wellmother’s legs across her lap. “Mama,” she whispered with a soft cr  
yet. Please.”

ipped     His heart aching, Elias wished with all his soul that he could ca  
ead.     burden for Celia. He wrapped an arm around her and hugged her so sh  
ie here, get closer to her mother.

ey had     “We shall have you home soon, Your Grace,” he reassured the do  
tion of “Stay with us.”

ie front     The duchess barely opened her eyes. She caught Celia’s hand and  
it on Elias’s chest. “I want you married to him, Celia. He is a good m  
d room good men are in such short supply.”

“Rest now, Mama. We can worry about that later.” Celia hiccuppe  
cry while trying to hold her mother’s hand, but the duchess placed it b  
er rise, Elias’s chest.

“Swear to me you will marry him,” the dowager said. “I will n  
indless without knowing such a man cares for you.”

Elias held his breath, unsure whether or not he wanted Celia to t  
“Clear oath. He wanted her to love him—not marry him out of guilt.

o reach     “Mama—”

sn’t the     “He will understand, Celia. Tell him everything. Give him the c  
r Grace never gave to my dearest Raymond. Do not marry your work and l  
your days in loneliness and regret. Land and riches mean little in th  
hurried The duchess wheezed in a deep breath and weakly coughed it out. “S  
r Grace in my dearest daughter. You are my precious treasure, and I cannot res  
are not protected and happy.”

en. “Do     “I will marry him, Mama. I swear it.”

Elias closed his eyes and slowly exhaled, feeling both elat  
it door. sorrowful. This was not the way he wished for Celia to choose to be h  
but he would deal with that later. For now, all he could do was suppor  
ie front what was about to be a very difficult time. He tried to make the d  
more comfortable in his arms. “Rest, Your Grace. We will sort this  
panic. once you regain your strength.”

He bent     The duchess closed her eyes and whispered, “I admire your op  
h as he dear boy.”

at with     Celia gently shuddered against him with silent weeping. He tighte  
arm around her and rested his cheek on her head, wishing he could t



ped her terrible pain away.

y. “Not The coach rolled to a stop in front of Hasterton House.

“We are here, Your Grace,” Elias said quietly as he carefully lif  
rried this and climbed down from the coach.

e might “Good,” the duchess whispered.

Celia hurried ahead, ran up the steps, and pounded on the do  
owager stepped to one side and looked back at Elias, waving for him to hurry.

When Gransdon opened the door, open-mouthed shock registered  
l placed face. “Berta!” he shouted in a very uncharacteristic bellow. “Friedrich  
an, and the physician! Now!”

Elias strode into the house and hurried up to the second floor. T  
d a soft duchess weighed nothing, and her limp silence concerned him. He fea  
ack on had already passed.

Berta rushed into the dowager’s room and turned down the cover  
not rest bed.

Elias eased her down among the pillows, then stepped back so Ce  
ake the Berta could tend to her. He bowed his head and prayed that the nob  
had not yet left them. He knew it was selfish to wish her more o  
weariness and pain, but he had grown quite fond of her and loathed t  
hance I of never seeing her again.

ive out A light knock at the door made him hurry across the room in the  
e end.” that Friedrich had already returned with the doctor. His hopes were ans

wear it, “Dr. MacMaddenly to see Her Grace,” said the spindly man with a  
t if you Scottish burr. Dressed all in black, for some uncomfortable reason, l

Elias the impression of an undertaker rather than a physician. The ger  
squinted at him over the thick lenses of his wire-rimmed spectac  
ed and understand there is some urgency.” His tone left no doubt he was tellin  
is wife, to step aside.

t her in Elias swung the door open wide and waved the man inside. “That  
owager coming so quickly, doctor. It is quite urgent.”

all out Dr. MacMaddenly snorted and hurried to the bedside, unceremo  
shooing the women out of the way. After setting his large black bag  
timism, bedside table, he leaned over the duchess. “Kindly open your eyes

Grace,” he gently coaxed her. When she failed to respond, he strai  
ned his and pointed at the door. “Her Grace needs privacy during my exam  
ake this Out with the lot of ye. I shall send for ye when I am ready, ye ken?”

“I would rather stay with my mother,” Celia said.

The doctor eyed her with a stern puckering of his mouth. “I need to see your mother, m’lady. So I can help her. It will not be long, better that ye wait outside.” He pointed at the door again. “Now, go, for your mother’s sake. Aye?”

Dr. MacMaddenly. She Elias gently but firmly pulled Celia away. “Come, dear one. We will get you some tea. Let Dr. MacMaddenly do what he can. Let me go down to his room on his downstairs to the parlor.”

! Fetch “I don’t want her to die without me here.” Celia kept her gaze locked on her mother but allowed Elias to ease her into his arms.

he frail The physician looked up from where he held the duchess’s wrist to feel her pulse. He held her hand with his finger and thumb. “Pulse is rapid and weak but steadier than I expected. If that changes, I shall get ye up here immediately. Now go and allow me to see what needs doing.”

“Celia, come.” Elias curled his arm around her and nudged her through the sitting room, into the hall, and to the top of the stair.

the lady She stiffened in his arms, stuck in place, then twisted around to look at her mother’s door. “I am not going any farther. What if she needs me?”

He took her hand and kissed it. “Then we shall sit right here on the stairs until she comes. To show he meant it, he plopped down, looked up at her, then held out his hand. “Join me, my lady?”

a heavy Despair and hopelessness slumping her shoulders, Celia dropped her head and gave him a look and covered her face with her hands.

gentleman Wrapping an arm around her, Elias leaned her against him and held her. “While she wept. Knowing she had tossed her reticule somewhere behind the door, he offered her the use of his handkerchief.”

“I have heard of Dr. MacMaddenly,” he said quietly, hoping to offer her some comfort. “Schooled in Edinburgh and highly sought after by those members of the *ton* needing care.”

“There is no hope.” The handkerchief she clutched to her mouth hid her face from his. “I brought in doctors from all over. None have helped her.”

s, Your “There is always hope.” Elias tipped her face up to his. “We will wait here until she tells us farewell.”

in. Her face crumpled, and she unleashed a pitiful wail while thumping her chest with her fist. “I do not want her to leave. She is all I have.”

He hugged her close again, rocking and shushing her, realizing his loneliness was inconsolable. It would do no good to remind her of her loneliness and 'tisOr of himself. She would not be alone in this world, but now was not the time for her logic. Now was the time to be there for her.

After what seemed like hours, the door behind them creaked open. Elias turned, and Celia lifted her head.

“I would speak to you both.” The doctor motioned for them to join him.

Celia jumped up and rushed into the sitting room. Elias followed her, looking on behind.

Standing in the center of the room, Dr. MacMaddenly shrugged and looked at his greatcoat as he spoke. “How long has Her Grace suffered with this condition? If you can do anything to help her, I would be most grateful.”

“For the past year,” Celia said. Bitterness sharpened her tone. “No physician in the civilized world has helped her. All of them clucked their tongues and told me to order her grave prepared.”

The doctor appeared unimpressed as he donned his hat and peered at his nose at her. “Obviously, none of those physicians were Scots trained in Edinburgh.” He picked up his bag, then shot a glance back at the bedroom door. “Her Grace suffers from a weakness of her heart. I administered a small dose of digitalis tincture and watched her closely. She appears to be tolerating it well enough, but dinna hesitate to fetch me if the need arises. I shall return tomorrow to check for improvement. I will need to see her daily to determine the exact amount required each day in order for her to enjoy life a bit more than she enjoys it at present. 'Tis a grand drug for cases such as hers, but it is exceedingly dangerous.” He dismissed them both with a curt nod. “I shall call again tomorrow.” Without waiting for a response or questions, he left.

Celia stared after him for a moment, then whirled about and rushed into the bedroom.

Elias debated for a moment whether to join her, then decided that Celia needed private time with her mother. Filled with an edginess that forbade standing still, he idly paced around the small room. It occurred to him he hadn't sent Monty's coach back to the Whitfields', but surely the driver had taken it upon himself to do so.

A quiet click made him stop and turn toward the bedroom door. A wave of relief crashed through him as Celia gave him a tremulous smile.

s fierce “She is resting peacefully,” she said, “and enjoying deeper breaths than she has in quite a while.”

he time He closed the distance between them and took her hands in his. “This is the best of news.”

n. Elias Celia agreed with a weak nod, then lowered her gaze to their hands. “I promised her I would speak with you before you went home this evening.” The hesitancy in her voice caused him concern. Was this what he would do if she did close would go back on her word and send him packing again? “Speak to me,” he repeated, carefully controlling his tone.

on his “In the library.” She eased her hands out of his and took a step back, placing an arm’s length of space between them. “I need a drink. Something stronger than tea. Would you like one too?”

And no “I would, indeed.” His infallible instincts told him he would need to get their

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A surge

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“I would, indeed.” His infallible instincts told him he would need it.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

CELIA TRIED TO pour the brandy without spilling, but with her trembling was less than successful. She had promised Mama to tell Elias the whole truth and give him the chance to either accept or refuse their life of lies. Mama regretted never giving Master Hodgely that choice.

“I have brandy this time rather than Madeira,” she called back over her shoulder.

“Anything is fine after this evening’s events.”

She bit her lip, knowing the events weren’t over. Before turning from the shelf of decanters, she sent up a silent prayer that what was about to happen would go well. After a deep breath, she forced a smile and joined Elias in the seating area in front of the small hearth. A cheery fire crackled with flames dancing behind the grating. It beat back the chill of the damp evening but did little to warm her hopes that Elias would understand. She handed the glass with the genteel nod of a perfect hostess. “Here you are, my lord.”

“Elias,” he gently corrected her. In the firelight, his golden hair shimmered with a richer warmth than usual. “You frighten me, Celia.”

“Frighten you?” She seated herself beside him on the small sofa in front of the fire and set her glass on the oval table beside it. She couldn’t help but smile. Not just yet. “How on earth have I frightened you?”

“Do you mean to send me away again?”

His bluntness almost caused her to choke. She swallowed hard and smiled at her lips. “I will not send you away again,” she said with a careful smile. She hoped was convincing. “Not ever.”

Then she stiffened her spine and folded her hands in her lap. Mama would be on with it. Delaying it would not make it any easier. The problem was, she wasn’t sure where to start. Perhaps a bit of layering was in order. “As a solicitor, I am sure you are well aware of the laws regarding the ownership of entailed property?”

He blinked as though unsure he had heard her correctly. “Yes. I am aware.”

aware of the laws. Why?”

“Then you know it cannot be sold because the entailment commo it to several generations of heirs. *Male* heirs. Farther down the succession.”

“I am quite familiar with the laws of primogeniture.” He sipped hi his unflinching gaze locked on her.

What could she say? How could she make him understand? “My ng, she died before I was born, turning my mother into a young widow, expect ole of it first child—the child who would decide her future.”

ma still He said nothing, watching her like a cat watches a cornered mous to make its last fatal attempt at fleeing.

ver her “I was told my mother sobbed when I was born. Both from joy a Joy about my good health and yet fear for what would become c financially, socially, where we would live.” She waited for him to co rom the When he didn’t, she continued, “You see, by the time I was born, my happen had not only lost my father but all her family as well. Influenz s in the understand. She was completely alone except for a few loyal servants.’ hin, its “But you and your brother are twins.” The puzzlement revealed evening slight furrow of his brow didn’t match the dawning realization smold led him his eyes. “I am sure your mother was relieved when he was born ord.” moments later. The duke’s heir.”

n eyes “She would have been—had he ever been born.” Celia waited, herself. “I am not a twin. Never have been. Not even while in my n in front womb.”

t drink. He frowned and slowly tilted his head to one side. “You do not r suggest...”

Celia rose, went to her desk, and signed a sheet of paper with th und wet signature she used for all business dealings. As she returned to Eli ess she gently blew on the ink to dry it. Without a word, she handed it to hi settled back in her seat and waited.

light as “This is not possible.” He barely shook his head while staring dow roblem official signature of Charles Tutcliffe, the sixth Duke of Hasterton. “ 1 order. you cannot mean to say...”

ing the “That we created Charles to protect our entailed properties, our our place in Society? The title? That over the years, with the help c um well well-paid and extraordinarily loyal individuals, we took the so

strained Hasterton holdings and formed the comfortably powerful es  
nly tiesenjoy today? That my mother, a woman of brilliance, successfully car  
line ofthis subterfuge until I took over the reins seven years ago at the gentle  
ten and six?”

s drink, “Subterfuge?” He tossed back his drink, then pointed the empty ;  
her. “This is not subterfuge. It is fraud. A fraud of the scale that wo  
/ fatheryou both hanged. Impersonating a peer?” He shook his head. “N  
ting herimpersonating a peer. Pulling one from your imagination.”

“And now you know why I tried to protect you from ruin.” He  
e aboutached with the need to break down and sob, but she refused to give  
tears. At least, not yet. “An intimate association with me would ma  
nd fear.just as guilty—whether you knew about our scheme or not.”

of us— “I still could be deemed guilty.” Elias lurched to his feet and s  
mment.back and forth in front of the hearth. “The entire firm could be charg  
motheroverseeing the Hasterton accounts all these years.” He halted and st  
za, youher. “At the time of your birth, your mother had the Bening a  
’ protected by her marriage contract. Those were rightfully hers to  
l in theneeded. Why did she not rely on them instead of creating this farce?”

ering in “At that time, the Bening accounts would not have provided enoug  
i a fewdormouse’s survival, and the crumbs left from my father’s wil

laughable. His many debts had to be settled.” Celia stood, unable to  
bracinglonger. “Like many young women of the peerage, Mama was pressur  
mother’smarrying my father for all the usual reasons. Her parents as much as

her to give up the man she truly loved. Yet when she gave birth to a d  
nean toired by a man she never wanted, she was expected to become a paup

she found another man to pay her way.” Celia thumped her chest, ange  
ie sameinjustice of it all setting her on fire. “Just because I was born female,  
ias, sheI was denied the properties, money, and status that would have right  
m, thenmine had I been blessed with a cock and a pair of bollocks.” She tap

temple. “Neither my nor my mother’s brains, nor our ability to reas  
n at themake sound business decisions, mattered. Without my mother’s ing  
’Surely,the title would have gone extinct. The entailed properties would hav

fallow until the Crown decided which of its favorite fawners deserve  
money,Any money left in the Hasterton accounts would have gone to the C  
f somecoffers too. All while my mother was forced to make do with very litt  
newhatshe found a man of the peerage willing to buy her body and feed he



tate wedaughter. Merely because I was born a girl and not a boy. Is that fairied offyou?”

age of “What the two of you did—still do—is not legal,” Elias said enough to make her rage burn even hotter.

glass at She jabbed the air, pointing at him. “And *that* is exactly why I could see telling you, and also why Master Hodgely was never told. Men do not lo. Not about the women they profess to love or supposedly wish to protect. *That* care about is themselves and their precious little world, where a woman's throatplace is only in their beds or padding their accounts with a fine, fat dove way to “That is not true.”

like you “Is it not?” Celia closed the distance between them and poked his chest. “Then why do you stand there looking ready to vault over any stormedyour way to be free of this place and never look back?”

ed after He raked a hand through his cropped hair, making the black curls tared at an end. “Your mother could have sold off the Bening lands.”

ccounts “There were no Bening lands until we purchased them with Hasteuse as profits three years ago. All other lands are entailed to the Hasterton t could not be sold. You know that.” She was furious with herself for gh for at this unfeeling man both her heart and her virginity. Devil take her. Still were been such a fool. “And besides, what purpose does *your mother* shout sit any *done* so advice do now other than belittle a dying woman who valiant red into care of her daughter without having to become anyone's whore?”

forced His crestfallen look gave her a hollow victory. He shook his head aughter is not fair, Celia.”

er until “Life is not fair, *Lord Raines*. It is high time you realized what er at the forced to learn at birth.” She hiked her chin higher. “Now you know all legally, truths. I have entrusted you with everything. All I ask is that you refrain ly been turning us over to the authorities because of Mama's health. Once she ped here you still feel the need to see me hang, then, by all means, do what you son and But until then, I beg upon your sense of honor and your Christian decency, let a frail, lonely old woman die in peace.”

re gone She hated the revulsion in his eyes. But she had been the one to d them, there, so by rights, she guessed she deserved it. “Well? May I have you brown's that you will take no action until after Mama dies? She has suffered ile until—or has she, according to *your* standards?”

r infant His eyes turned flinty, and his expression settled into an unreadable

r, I ask “What do you intend to tell Her Grace about this conversation?”

“That is none of your affair.” But he was right. Mama would ask loudly would she say?

“On the contrary, *Lady Cecelia*.” Elias swaggered toward her, but delayed her up a step. “You know as well as I that Her Grace will ask if you did not care and will also wish to know my reaction. What do you intend to say? All she is a dying woman whose last wish was to see you loved and protected by a man’s side.” He hit his chest with his fist. “*Married* to me. If you tell her I did not take it well—”

“Which you haven’t—”

“May I please finish?” He glared at her, obviously incensed by her interruption.

She rolled her eyes and flicked a hand. “Go on.”

“As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted...” He scooped her up, daring her to do so again. “If you tell her I did not take it well and that we two shall no longer become one, do you not fear how that will affect her health?”

“It will not affect her nearly as bad as prison or a trip to the gallows she had.”

“Perhaps not. But it will still affect her. Are you willing to risk it by sending her on her way faster with a heady dose of regret for bringing her to London?”

“I hate you.” She fisted her hands so tightly that the seams of her dress pinched her fingers.

“I hate you more,” he growled, then shook his head. “But I do not regret I was a part of sending your mother to her grave any faster than she is now of my going.”

Cecilia eyed him, barely controlling the urge to throw something at him. “What do you suggest, Lord Raines? Being a *male*, I feel sure you have a superior plan than I, a mere female, could ever hope to dream up.”

“We will reveal your identity to the world and marry as she wished. My brother will continue his travels on the Continent.” He towered over her and put his finger to his lips. “And we will be perceived as the epitome of a loving couple—until Her Grace leaves this world and is laid to rest beneath the earth as your husband in Germany.”

“And then you will turn me over to the authorities and claim you discovered the scheme until Mama died, and I confessed that Charles

exist.” Celia glared at him, clenching her teeth until her jaw ached. Elias. What a hellhound of the worst sort to offer such a hardhearted plan, but it protect Mama. “Fine. I will do so to protect the happiness of my mother’s jacking days.”

told me “Fine,” he said, looking ready to spit. He suddenly shifted and after all, to be listening in the hallway’s direction. “It sounds as though the restricted by household has arrived. Might I suggest keeping our agreement between us did not ourselves? The fewer who know, the better.”

Celia would not betray Sophie or Frannie’s trust, and she would take secrets to the gallows with her to protect them from the same fate. She by then never lie to them. From this moment forward, however, she would lie every chance she got. “The terms of our agreement will be between us alone.”

While he granted her a nod, he did not seem fully convinced. Finding that would seal the bargain with a meaningful declaration usually reserved for her lovers rather than the enemy Elias had become.

She stormed over to her desk and rummaged through the drawers. “She came up with a short length of ribbon and the scissors she kept for risk emergency trimming of loose threads. After tying the ribbon around your lock of her hair, she snipped it off, marched back to him, and placed a sacrificed curl in his hand. “To bind our agreement and the secrecy between us gloves He politely bowed. “So be it, my lady.” He tucked it into the inner pocket of his coat and offered his arm. “Shall we greet them with the doctor’s wish to and our decision for an immediate marriage?”

already Celia glared at him as she took his arm, determined to show him he could not be outdone. “A fine idea, my lord. Let the final scheme begin at him. Concentrating on relaxing her clenched jaw, she walked with him to the far end of the library and called to the ladies heading down the hallway, “I know this evening has been too worrisome to bear, but if you could join us in the parlor. Your Elias and I have some pleasant news to counter the horridness of the doctor’s. The four women she had known all her life stood there staring at her and happy, Celia read their leeriness as if it was her own. They knew something side her terribly amiss. After releasing Elias’s arm with a subtle yank, she walked forward and opened the parlor doors. “Please. If just for a moment. I prefer you never to share only good news.”

“Of course.” Sophie linked arms with her mother and Frannie and

Elias washed them forward.

It would “Yes, we could use some good news after enduring the Whitfield  
er’s lastpas and then dear Thea’s collapse,” Frannie’s fake mother-in-law  
mother said. “Please assure us she is resting well.”

appeared “She is indeed,” Celia said, forcing a false smile. Once the lad  
of yourseated themselves, she continued with the only actual good news there  
between share. “Dr. MacMaddenly has determined that Mama has a weak hea  
esteemed doctor has a medication that will hopefully help her cope v  
ke their condition. In fact, he administered the first dose this evening, and M  
e would resting much better than before.”

to Elias At her reference to *Mama* rather than Her Grace, all four won  
teen us sharp looks over at Elias where he stood by the door.

“Do not worry.” Celia held out a hand, beckoning him over. “He l  
ne. Sheam Lady Cecilia and plans to write to Charles about our intentions.”

ved for With a charming smile that made her heart even heavier, Elias  
forward, took her hand in his, and pressed it lovingly to his cheek. “W  
rs until be married immediately,” he announced. “And while we would l  
for the blessing of the duke before we marry, His Grace often takes quite sor  
a small to reply, and we are not willing to wait.”

ced the “Yes,” Celia said, struggling to keep her voice from cracking. “Ma  
reof.” given us her blessing, and that is enough.”

pocket Sophie was the first to break the awkward silence that followe  
s report hurried to hug Celia. “Congratulations, sister! I am so happy for you.”

Frannie, her mother, and Sophie’s mother followed suit.

um she “And when will this glorious event take place?” Frannie asked  
1.” forced brightness that made Celia cringe.

1 out of “As soon as I obtain the special license,” Elias said. “With an  
ow this before the week is out.”

parlor, “Splendid,” Sophie said, then turned to Celia. “Do forgive us, sis  
ay.” we really must retire now. The evening has been quite draining, but l  
at her. pleased it ended on such a happy note.” With a startled look, she tu  
ng was Elias. “My lord, do forgive me, but your brother waits for you in his c  
hurried He refused to come inside because he feared that the news about the c  
romise would not be good. I nearly forgot to tell you.”

“Think nothing of it.” Elias took Celia’s gloved hand once ag  
tugged bowed over it. “Until tomorrow, my dearest. Rest well.”

She forced herself to beam up at him with a loving smile while making a *faux* curtsy. "I shall dream of you," she lied, damning him with all her heart. She held her breath until her odious judge and executioner exited the house. As soon as she heard the front door close behind him. As soon as it thudded shut, she sagged down into the nearest chair and held her head in her hands.

"Sister!" Sophie and Frannie cried out in unison as they rushed to her side.

"Tell us this instant," Frannie ordered her. "What was the meaning of that charade we just witnessed?"

Celia lifted her head and gave Frannie and Sophie's mothers a stern look. "You must not tell Mama any of what I am about to tell you. Swear it."

Lady Rydleshire and Lady Ardsmere both held up their hands and swore on their heads.

"No. Whatever it is, do not speak of it until we leave the room," Lady Rydleshire said.

Lady Ardsmere nodded as she hurried toward the door with Sophie and the mother. "Thea, Lavinia, and I made a pact long ago that we would never share secrets from each other. If there is anything that must be kept from our mothers, even if for her own good, then we would be more comfortable not telling them about it, so we do not break our word to her."

Celia nodded and waited until they left the room, then closed the doors behind them.

Sophie patted the seat between her and Frannie. "Now sit and tell us what happened."

With a despondent huff, Celia flopped down between them, leaning against the cushions, and covered her eyes with her hands. "On the way home from the Whitfields', Mama *extracted* a promise from me." She let her head drop and stared up at the ceiling. "She wanted me to marry Elias so he could protect me."

"And?" Frannie prompted.

"And she also made me swear to tell him the truth." Celia kept her eyes locked on the cream-colored plaster roses decorating the pale blue wall. "So, I did."

"You didn't," Sophie whispered.

"I did."

"All of it?" Frannie asked.

managing “All of it,” Celia repeated. She folded her hands and sat straight  
art. She gave them both reassuring looks. “The only thing I withheld was infor  
ise, and about the Sisterhood. As far as he knows, my deception is the only  
out, she fraudulent behavior. I will take your stories with me to the gallows.”

“To the gallows?” Sophie shrieked so loudly that both Frannie and  
l to her lunged to cover her mouth. She batted them away and lowered her vo  
whisper. “Who is sending you to the gallows?”

g of the “Elias.” Celia pulled in a deep breath, determined to harden hers  
accept the deal she had made with the devil. “To give Mama peace u  
rn look, time comes, he said we should marry and give her the perception that  
” a loving couple. Since she is already well on her way to the grave, he  
l shook conscience couldn’t bear it if he were the one to make her la  
unbearable by sending us to prison and then on to be hanged. But onc  
,” Lady gone and laid to rest in Germany, he will turn me over to the auth

After all, as a solicitor, he cannot be privy to any activities as repreh  
ophie’s impersonating a peer and committing innumerable fraudulent activities  
er keep “He actually plans to turn you in after your mother dies?” Franni  
r sister, in a horrified whisper.

nowing “To protect himself, his career, and his illustrious firm.” Celia  
herself up from the sofa, crossed the room, and yanked on the golden l  
e parlor embroidered with rich green leaves of ivy. When Gransdon entered,  
longer had the energy to manage a smile. “I know it is quite late, Gr  
us what but please bring us any cold meats and cheeses Cook might be wi  
prepare. And wine, Gransdon. Copious amounts of wine.”

ed back “Right away, Miss Bening.”

y home “And Gransdon,” she called out before he lumbered down the hall  
r hands Bening the companion no longer exists. Please spread the word that ev  
e could may relax and call me Lady Cecilia.”

Gransdon behaved as though the request was as normal as any  
“Yes, my lady.” After a proper nod, he turned and left.

er gaze “Raines cannot mean to do this to you.” Sophie rose and worried l  
ceiling, back and forth across the room. “The man told you he loved you. Y  
you loved him.”

“Men will say anything.” Much to her shame, Celia’s voice crack  
tears escaped. “I am a damned fool for believing him and shall pay for  
my life!”

er, then “Oh, Celia!” Sophie rushed to her side, and Frannie joined her.

rmation “And another thing.” Celia sniffed and forced herself to hold it to  
case of “He said not to tell either of you the truth of our arrangement. The few  
knew the better, he said.” She huffed a bitter laugh. “I told him I would  
d Celiayou.” More tears escaped, and this time, she didn’t fight them. “I wi  
ice to ahim, but I will never lie to you, my sisters.”

All three of them wept together, then hurried to turn away and hid  
elf and sorrow when Gransdon and Friedrich entered with their late repast.

ntil her “Will that be all, my lady?” the butler asked, a hint of concern shac  
we are tone.

said his “Yes. Thank you, Gransdon.” Celia offered a nod, then quickly  
st days aside again.

e she is “Lady Cecilia?” Friedrich said. “Can we help you?”

iorities. “I fear I am beyond helping, Friedrich, but I very much appreci  
sible as offer.” She managed a smile and waved them away. “Go to you  
s.” gentlemen. I know you are weary. When the ladies and I finish, it  
e asked cleared away tomorrow.”

Gransdon and Friedrich each gave her a somber bow, then depar  
pushed closed the doors behind them.

bellpull Frannie hurried to the table and poured them each a glass of wi  
she no eyes narrowed as she handed one to Celia. “Perhaps you might be  
ansdon, widow soon after your mother’s death. *Before* your beloved husband  
lling to chance to turn you in.”

“I am a fraud, Frannie. Not a murderer.” Celia took a very  
unladylike gulp.

.. “Miss “You don’t have to be the one to kill him,” Sophie said while  
very onethrough a platter of sweetmeats.

“Both of you stop.” While thoughts of slapping Elias might cu  
/ other. bring her no small amount of pleasure, Celia couldn’t imagine actually  
him. After all, the crime was hers to pay for. And damn and blast it a  
ier way still loved him.

ou said “So, you truly mean to marry him?” Sophie asked as she held out a  
of cold meats.

ed, and “That was the agreement.” Celia waved away the food, opting fo  
: it with wine instead. “The price of his silence until Mama passes.” She stare  
at the ruby liquid swirling in the glass. “It is the least I can do after

chose me over the man she loved. She deserves peace.”

together. “Surely, the marriage will be in name only?” Frannie snapped off her whoof apple while arching a brow.

didn’t tell “I would imagine so, judging by the revulsion on his face when I told her that Charles did not exist.” Celia lowered herself back onto the sofa,

her legs at the ankles, and rudely propped her feet on the low table in front of her. The memory of the disgust in his eyes made her tears spill over again.

“A shame, really,” she said softly. “Because I really did love him.” She trembled with a sad little shrug. “Still do.”

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“TELL ME, DAMN you!” Monty circled him. “You’ve been at this since you home, and it’s nearly dawn.”

Stripped down to his waist, sweat streaming down his body pummeled the long black leather bag suspended from a rafter in the ceiling of his cellar. “I am not yet ready to speak of it,” he said between hard punches.

“In the carriage, you said the doctor from Edinburgh left you with the impression that he might help the duchess. At least grant her a bit of comfort in her final days.” Monty caught the bag and stopped swinging, then widened his stance to prepare for a more vicious assault. “Fortuitous news—correct?”

Elias hit the bag with another series of rapid-fire blows, envisioning passages of law regarding entailed properties, primogeniture, and a punishment for fraud. All those damnable things had ripped his beloved from the life he had envisioned for them. He attacked the bag again, knocking Monty back several steps.

Monty pushed away from the bag, yanked off his coat and waistcoat, and rolled up his sleeves. “Either talk to me or fight me.” He held up his fists in a vulnerable pose that Elias would never use against him. “Talk or fight, brother. What will it be?”

With an enraged roar, Elias tore into the heavy leather punching bag with renewed fury. “I signed a contract with Satan, damn you, and have yet to find a loophole.”

“What the deuce are you talking about?” Monty let his fists drop.

Elias turned away from the bag and thumped Monty in the chest with enough force to back him up. “What I am about to tell you does not leave any room. Do you give me your word?”

Rubbing the spot Elias just hit, Monty scowled at him. “Of course. I mean it, Aurelias Montseton Raines. I will have your word!”

Monty lifted both hands and retreated another step. “You have my

Just don't use my full name again. You sound like Father."

"Calling me that will not help your cause." Elias strode over worktable and started unwinding the strips of cloth he used to pro  
knuckles. "I met the Duke of Hasterton."

"Truly?" Monty joined him at the table. "The famed duke no one h  
seen? What's the fellow like?"

Elias locked eyes with Monty. He knew he could trust his broth  
ce I got this damn secret was dangerous. "The duke is Celia."

"You mean he looks like her?" Monty shrugged. "Stands to reas  
r, Eliasboy. They are twins."

iling of Elias shook his head. "You misunderstand me. He *is* Celia. C  
iches. Hasterton."

with the Monty squinted one eye shut as if trying to sight a pistol. "What  
it moremean *Celia is Hasterton*? That is impossible."

it from "Why? Because the man can do no wrong when it comes to invest  
attack. Because none of his many businesses have ever failed to turn an asc

profit?" Elias propped his hands on the table and bowed his hea  
sioningamazed at the duchess and Celia's ability to manage such a grand  
nd thewith such extraordinary finesse and precision. He turned and thumped  
d Celiaagain. "They made him up, man. Charles was never born. Never  
lockingLady Cecilia is the only child of the Duke and Duchess of Hasterton."

Monty's expression turned incredulous. "What are you saying?"  
oat, and "The duchess *pretended* to have a son so as not to lose everythi  
ists in aend up a pauper, because the funds guaranteed by her marriage contr  
it, littleher husband's will were far from adequate. The brilliant woman ran th  
herself until Celia took over seven years ago and increased their wea  
ag withholdings tenfold."

to find "Gads." Monty scratched his head as he meandered over to a v  
stool and plopped down on it. "How bloody brilliant," he said with a s  
laugh.

st hard "How bloody fraudulent," Elias snapped. "Fraudulent enough to se  
ive thisboth hanged."

"Only if they get caught." Monty thoughtfully pursed his lips and  
" his head. "My dear brother, I see your overactive sense of morality rea  
ugly head." He rose to his feet. "Good heavens, man. The duchess is  
y word.dying, and the other cunning criminal is the woman you love."

“This farce cannot go on.” Elias threw his hands in the air. “Somec to the discover it, and then I will hang with them. Such a scandal could brin tect his the entire firm.”

Monty scratched through the morning stubble on his chin. “As I se as ever boy, the scheme has survived quite well for twenty-odd years now should it not continue to thrive?”

er—but “I am a solicitor. A partner with a prestigious law group.” Elias si up a generous square of linen off the table and scrubbed the sweat fi on, old face and chest. “How can I knowingly condone such a thing?”

“Because if you love the woman, you will do anything to keep he Celia is” Monty scowled at him, slowly prowling closer like a predator about to The nearer he drew, the more he tilted his head to one side. “What ha do you done?”

“Behaved like a complete ass,” Elias said as he hung his head. ments? His contempt for his father’s questionable dealings and lack of ounding had caused him to become a self-righteous devil determined to see t id, still dishonest got what he felt they deserved. His pompous sense of prope schemepainted everything black or white. There was no middle ground. No sh Monty Gray. No justifications for any choice or action. It was either right or existed. Legal or not. And those who shunned the law deserved the damnati received.

He huffed a bitter laugh. “I begged her to trust me. To tell me wl ing and troubling her so I could help her and her mother.”

act and “And when she did?” Monty’s hard-jawed look said he already kn e estate answer.

lth and “When she did, I turned on her. Reacted like her assigned solicitor of the man who loves her with an all-consuming fury.”

wooden Monty clasped his hands to the small of his back and meandered b: norting forth in front of him. “You mentioned signing a contract with Satan?”

“Her Grace took a liking to me.” Elias snorted another mirthless e them “Why she did so, I have no idea. But she did, and on the day we cor her will—which is now invalid, I might add—she extracted an oath fi l shook to win Celia’s love. To marry her. To love her and protect her.”

ring its “And how is that a deal with the devil?” Monty stopped paci already pinned him with a confused frown.

“Her Grace also drew a promise from Celia to marry me.” Bi

one will churned through Elias. "Her Grace is a sly one. No wonder the estate g down under her care." He rifled through his clothes draped over the back of

His chest burned with his breaking heart as his fingers closed around e it, old precious lock of hair. "After Celia told me everything, she begged me v. Why turn her and her mother over to the authorities because of her mother's health. I told her that her mother expected us to marry, and if we did r natched Grace would not only be upset in her final days, but had also insinua rom his would not enjoy peace when she died."

"And?" Monty prodded while moving closer. r safe." Elias held up the silky black curl and showed it to his brot o attack, suggested we marry and assume the appearance of a happy, loving cc ave you make Her Grace's last days as pleasant as possible. Celia agreed and g this to seal the bargain that once her mother is laid to rest in German; then turn her over to the authorities. She will admit her guilt, state that morals I nor the firm were aware of the scheme, and will go to the gallows t that the argument."

r ethics Monty's mouth went ajar with an incredulous stare. "In all my da; ades of not believe I have ever met such a damned fool."

wrong. "Nor have I." Elias cradled the lock of hair in his palm, staring do on they wishing it meant happiness instead of the cruel bargain he had be stupid and stunned to stop at the time, the bargain that had broken hat was heart. He had utterly failed her. "When I suggested we marry duchess's sake, I did not say I wanted to turn Celia in once her moth rew the She was the one who suggested it, and idiot that I was, I did not co her." He slowly shook his head. "I wanted her as my wife. At least fo instead while. I hoped..."

"You hoped what? What the deuce did you mean to do after the d ack and died?" Monty glared at him in disbelief.

"Devil if I know." Elias carefully tucked the treasured curl back in; s laugh. coat pocket. "I was still in shock, I suppose. From learning the truth."

pleted Monty moved to stand in front of him, eyeing him with what appe rom me be both sympathy and frustration. "I realize a childhood of mistre created your rather extreme perception about what is right and v ng and wrong." He threw up his hands and turned away. "I wish you had Mother. She would have saved you from this... *debacle*."

tterness "Well, I didn't know her." Elias hoisted himself up onto the

thrived worktable and sat there, sagging forward with his head in his hands. a chair. do not know how to make this right.”

Celia’s The table groaned as Monty joined him. “Do you love her?”

do not to “More than I thought it possible to love anyone.”

is failing “Then that is all that matters.” Monty shifted back and forth, making the table creak again. “They harmed no one with their scheme. In fact, the intended shewell could have harmed themselves if they had not shown such in-

You know what has happened to poor widows and daughters without provisions. And Celia and her mother have also educated the business here. “Immense. Been a boon to the economy. The *duke’s* every action simple to Exchange or any other venture is studied and replicated in an attempt to achieve the same success. Some have done quite well. Others—not so much, I can say, but that is no fault of Celia’s or her mother.”

neither “She thinks I have the lowest opinion of her now. Because of the way she reacted.”

“Fall on your knees and beg the woman’s forgiveness, for heaven’s sake, I do. Have you never done that before?” Monty thumped him on the shoulder.

“Tell her how you feel, man.”

Even at it, Elias straightened and shook his head. “She will never believe me. I cut her too deeply.”

Celia’s Monty blew out a heavy sigh. “But she means to marry you according to your *deal*, yes?”

her died. “Yes.”

contradict “Well, it’s rather putting the cart before the horse, but it appears that you need to woo your wife to win back her love and trust in you.”

swung his feet, making the creaking of the table louder.

cowager Elias clamped hold of his knee and stopped him. “Sit still, damn you!”

“Sorry.” Monty hopped down and brushed off the seat of his trousers. “Win your wife’s heart and convince her that no matter what happens, I will not escort her to the gallows.”

prepared to Blowing out a heavy sigh, Elias scrubbed his gritty eyes. His head always made everything sound so easy. Too easy. And it never worked that way. “And I suppose I turn a blind eye while she carries on with her scheme as usual?” That thought made him inwardly cringe. Years of

struggle against the unlawful curdled in his gut. “It cannot possibly go on forever. At some point, people will suspect something is not right. A duke of the

“And it’s twenty constantly traveling is one thing, but an older duke who she married and fathering an heir will draw too much attention.” He stared at the floor, drowning in despondency. “I cannot bear to lose her, Monty now, and not years in the future.”

“Have you not heard of recluses who never marry?” Monty shrugged. “Once the duchess dies, kill the man off in an accident. Drown him or claim him eaten by cannibals or some such nonsense.”

“But then Celia would eventually lose the vast estate she and her mother built.” He already knew his lioness was proud of all she and her mother had achieved and would not be likely to stand idly by and watch it float away. “And you know how difficult it is to have a missing peer proclaimed dead. It could take a decade or more.” He pinned a hard glare on his brother.

“Do not even suggest it. I am not about to *purchase* a body for a funeral.” Monty shrugged again. “Waiting for him to be declared dead would give you several years of bliss. But it sounds as if losing the entailed peerage’s sake, and whatever monies had not been transferred to a safe account is not a good idea. You are positive there are no other relations, even on the very distant branches of the Hasterton line, who could lay claim to the estate were the duke to die?”

“According to Celia and from what I recall of the records, there are no other relations.” Elias thought back over his conversations with Master Hodgely. His brother had mentioned no one who might contest the peerage. “And if there were, we would have known by now, considering the wealth involved. The Crown would happily take it all at the first opportunity. You know how the Duke of Marlborough’s dukedom could be amended to allow Celia and her mother to inherit the dukedom successively after the death of her brother leaving no other heirs. Surely, you are familiar with Parliament’s act amending the Dukedom of Marlborough?”

Hope pounded in Elias’s chest as thunderously as his heart. He stared at his brother. “Why did I not think of that?”

“Because raw emotion temporarily incapacitated you. I have heard that love can be quite toxic.” Monty shook a finger at him. “That is why you must avoid it at all costs.” He clapped a hand on Elias’s shoulder. “I could have sworn the act gets the proper support and attention to pass without issue. At present, it is preened like the proudest of birds, smoothing back its longish black feathers and that badly needed a trim. “I am well thought of in both the House of

ould beand the House of Commons, if I do say so myself.”

d down Elias held up a hand. “Not yet. Timing is critical. If we attempt  
ity. Nothing at the same time my marriage becomes public knowledge, it will  
very suspicious. Especially with the duke so young, and quite alive  
ed. “Orspeak.”

t sea or Monty agreed with a thoughtful nod. “Yes...and then, if we claim  
dead immediately thereafter, it would look even more suspect. So, ho  
motherwe go about this?”

her had Elias slid off the table, scooped up his clothes, and headed tow  
t away.stairs. “Come. I need food and drink to think straight.”

legally “Several hours of sleep might do you wonders as well.” Monty fo  
brother.him.

al.” Mrs. Camp and Sarah the maid turned as the pair entered the kitch  
uld buywhirled back around and gave Elias their backs.

operties “Good morning, my lord,” Mrs. Camp said. She curtsied without  
t on thehim. “Up quite early for our exercise, are we?”

fringes Monty thumped him on the back. “Shirt, man. Have you no manne  
o die?” “Good heavens! Forgive me, Mrs. Camp. Sarah.” Elias shrugged  
re not.”shirt. “It is safe to turn now, ladies. I am properly covered.”

mentor Mrs. Camp turned, gave him a relieved smile, then pointed at th  
were, I“A second pitcher of water for his lordship’s room, Sarah. He’ll be v  
volved.an ample wash before he goes out today.”

/ that.” Sarah dipped a curtsy to Elias and Monty both, then scurried out to  
for theorders.

sons to “I believe she is saying you are a bit ripe, old man,” Monty teased.

ives no “Why no, Your Grace.” Mrs. Camp aimed a quick curtsy at Mo  
ikedomwould never say such a thing to his lordship.” But mirth twinkled in h  
and her plump cheeks turned even rosier.

tared at “Mrs. Camp, would it be a terrible imposition if my brother and I  
breakfast here in the kitchen—alone?” Elias seated himself at the wc  
l it saidin the center of the room and motioned for Monty to do the same.

s why I “Now, my lord?” She glanced back at the stove that she and Sai  
see thatjust lit. Several sticks of wood lay nearby, waiting to be added to the  
ie.” Hekindled flame. “You never eat before ten a.m.”

:k curls “The Whitfields’ dinner party was a complete disaster,” Monty tol  
f Lordsa gossipy whisper. “They completely ran out of food within the first h



were watering down the port to make it last.”

such a “Oh my, they will be ruined, will they not?” Mrs. Camp greedily appeared every word with surprising satisfaction. She wasn’t usually a woman, so she took such great pleasure in the pitfalls of others.

But then Elias remembered that Mrs. Camp and the Whitehead housekeeper had maintained a long-running feud. He smiled and joined in. “I shall get his breakfast cooked faster. Too many guests. Too little food and

He leaned toward her. “And it was said that Prinny was going to show up and the Mrs. Camp gasped. “Did he?”

Elias shrugged. “I am unsure. The heat of the crowded room overwhelmed the poor Duchess of Hasterton, and my brother and I had to see her home

“Oh my, you have had nothing to eat in ages, then.” Mrs. Camp turned on, then about and started chucking wood into the stove. “Let me get this going then I’ll fetch the cakes from the pantry and hurry with the tea and coffee

“That’ll get you started while I cook the eggs, kidneys, chops, and understand you don’t usually eat such a large breakfast, but you must be famished.” She turned and shook a finger at him. “Why did you not wait

on when you arrived home? I would have set you out a late supper.” Without waiting for an answer, she bustled out of the room, disappearing in the doorway.

“Well played,” Elias told Monty. “How did you know a juicy woman would get her moving?”

Monty fixed him with a superior look. “I know women.”

Stretching to watch the pantry door, Elias leaned across the table toward his brother. “I have been thinking. If I tell Celia of our plan to help Monty. “Original patent amended to name her as the heir, she might forgive me.

“She might also take that as your saying you cannot love her unless legitimate rather than a brilliant fraud.” Monty leaned back in his chair and made a face. “I advise you to play this carefully, brother. You said you would not hurt her deeply after she trusted you.”

“Do not remind me.” Elias pinched the bridge of his nose and rubbed the corners of his burning eyes. The memory of the hurt on Celia’s face newly haunted him. She felt as if he had betrayed her—and he had. “I am monstrous as our father.”

“No, you are not.” Monty leaned forward to say something else but stopped as Mrs. Camp whisked back into the room.

“Start on these, Your Grace and my lord.” She placed two platters on the table with slices of plum cake, seed cakes, and Elias’s favorite saffron buns. “Tea is next. The kettles on the hearth are almost ready.” She set the table with cups, plates, and silverware, then rushed over to the hearth, poured the fields’ steaming water into the teapot, and brought it to the table as well. Exhausted in her work with a critical eye, she threw her hands in the air. “Milk, sugar, honey. Where is my mind?” She dashed back into the pantry, then returned with those.

“Well done, Mrs. Camp.” Monty filled his plate, then sat back over the fire as she poured his tea.

“You cannot have her,” Elias said, knowing his brother’s tactics. Mrs. Camp went uncharacteristically silent with the praise, of good, pleased curtsy, then turned to the stove and started preparing the rest of the breakfast banquet she had promised. There would be no more private lives. She finished.

As Elias washed down a bite of cake with tea, he decided Monty was likely right about Celia’s reaction if he told her of their plan before she was married. In fact, she might even refuse marriage if she became the legatee of the Duchess of Hasterton. He would not risk that. Celia would be his wife, and he would win her love again. Somehow.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“DR. MACMADDENLY IS such a charming man. Do you not think so?”

Celia looked up from the book she might as well put back on the shelf. All she could think about was Elias and their cruel bargain. “Forgive me, Mama. What did you say?”

Her mother smiled as she gently tugged a vibrant blue thread up to the body of a partially embroidered bluebird. “I think Dr. MacMaddenly quite charming. Do you not find him so?”

The physician was a pompous, overly proud Scot, but Celia decided to say that, since Mama appeared much improved under his care. “I find him very knowledgeable.”

“Very knowledgeable?”

Celia turned the page she had read at least three times and still could not remember a word of. “Yes. Very knowledgeable. Your color is better than it has been for months, and your energy is increasing. We are very fortunate that Friedrich found the good doctor.”

“Are you unwell?” Her mother lowered her needlework and studied Celia with a suspicious scowl.

“Unwell?” Celia asked. It was far better to repeat the question than to answer it truthfully. Mama had no idea just how unwell she had been. “We have been confessing all their sins to Elias.”

“You are never diplomatic, and you always repeat the question when you do not wish to answer it honestly.” The duchess cast a disapproving glance down her nose at Celia. “Why are you so distracted? Is it because Lord Raines has not called upon us for almost a week?”

Lord Raines hadn’t called upon them because the man more than could not tolerate the sight of them. But Celia could not admit that. Instead, she forced an indulgent expression. “He sent a note begging for forgiveness, remember?”

Her mother’s eyes narrowed.

Celia clenched her teeth, belatedly remembering that Mama was not to swallow a lie easily. To fool her required Herculean effort. It had been long since Celia tried to trick her mother about anything that she had forgotten what a chore it was.

Resettling herself in the chair, she lifted her book as though aching to get back to it. “We cannot expect him to postpone a request from Prinny.”

The duchess appeared to accept that answer. “As long as you know your heart.” She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “There is nothing else troubling you, is there?”

“Something else?”

“Stop repeating my questions!” The duchess smacked the chair arm with a hard spat.

“You are in a temper.” Celia smiled. Her mother hadn’t had the energy to be so ill-tempered in a very long while. “I honestly do not know what you are referring to. Forgive me for my ignorance.”

“Flowers.” The way the duchess drew out the word could only mean one thing. “After all, is it not nearing your *time* to bloom?”

“Rest assured, Mama, someday you will be a grandmother,” Celia said. “But *not yet*.”

Her mother seemed disappointed with that news and even reacted with a frustrated huff. “Did Lord Raines tell you when he would call again? If all, we must give the modiste a time to finish your gown.”

“He did not say. I am sure he will call on us as soon as he can.” Celia lifted her book again, determined to hide within its pages.

The loud clacking of the front door’s brass knocker made her jump. Deep down in her soul, she knew it was Elias. No, not Elias. It was her husband and executioner—and soon, her husband, who would bide his time until heaven only knew what else until he could be rid of her.

“Lord Raines,” Gransdon announced as Elias joined them in the parlor. Celia gritted her teeth and struggled to hold a pleased expression as he bowed to her mother, then turned and took her hands in his.

“You do forgive me for not calling until now, yes?” The sincerity in his voice almost crumbled her composure.

“Of course,” she said over-brightly. Scolding herself for sounding so unbecomingly, she swallowed hard and resolved to do better. “One cannot put off the regent.”

not one Elias's hopeful smile faltered and something akin to pain filled his eyes. "How Pain? How ridiculous. She had to be mistaken. It was more than likely she had disgust for her that he was trying to hide.

She eased her hands out of his and motioned to the chair beside her. "Do sit. Granson already knows to bring tea."

"Yes, do," her mother told him. "Tell us about your doings for the past week that is regretful."

Elias shook a finger at the duchess as he took a seat. "Now, now, Grace. Not everything can be shared—as much as I would like to. But I say it does my heart good to find you enjoying an afternoon here in the parlor."

"Dr. MacMadden is a truly gifted physician." The duchess placed her needlework on the side table, rose from her chair, and, with arms crossed, slowly turned in a graceful circle. "I am well enough to dance at the next ball we attend."

Rising, Elias took her hand and bowed over it. "Wonderful news. I will save me a spot on your dance card?"

Celia watched their byplay, her cheeks aching with her forced smile. When Elias held out his hand for her to join them, she bit the inside of her lip before standing and sliding her hand into his. "With Mama so recovered, I am sure her dance card will fill quite quickly."

He tugged Celia closer and made her knees weak with a smoldering gaze. "Ah yes, but surely she will save a dance for her daughter's future husband."

He turned and aimed the deadliness of his charm at the duchess. "Would you cringe, Your Grace?"

"But of course, my lord." The duchess patted his hand, then released it. "Do forgive me, but I just remembered some correspondence that I absolutely cannot allow to wait a moment longer."

"But your tea," Celia said, panicking at being left alone with Elias.

"I shall have Granson bring mine to my private sitting room." The duchess gave them a saucy wink. "And since the two of you are so young and unmarried, I will indulge you with an afternoon without a chaperon. I shall be pointed at them both. "But I shall leave word with Granson that if I am called, I am to be fetched immediately to return before any visitors are disappointed for appearance's sake."

"Before you go, Your Grace," Elias said. "I have the special license for dancing."

his eyes beamed an excited smile first at the duchess and then at Celia. "All we really desire is the day I can bring the clergyman to perform the ceremony."

Celia braced herself, determined not to sag to the floor and sob. Elias was quite a convincing actor. If only all this was real.

She almost snorted. The marriage would be real, or at least legal. The princeling she had hoped to nurture and grow was gone.

Celia weakly fluttered a hand. "The modiste is finishing my gown, Your Grace. As soon as she is done, we can marry."

The duchess patted his arm. "Two days, dear boy. I shall tell the priest. We must have the gown in two days' time. Will that do?"

He turned to Celia. "What say you, my precious lioness? In two weeks' time, will you become my wife and make me the happiest man alive?"

"Yes," she said, frustrated that her voice was determined to quiver. She had made this damnable bargain, she'd had no idea how difficult it would be to carry it out. "Two days will be perfect."

"Celia?" Her mother reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I have never seen you so pale. Should you go up and rest?"

If she took the opportunity to escape, Mama would suspect something. Celia shook her head. She had no choice but to stay. "I simply ate a biscuit. All I took the time for at breakfast was a cup of chocolate."

The duchess appeared unconvinced but released her hand and turned her gaze to Elias. She gave him a stern look. "Remember your oath, Lord Rainier. Do not break it."

He bowed to the dowager. "I shall, Your Grace."

The duchess kissed Celia's cheek, then cast a knowing smile back at her. "I shall be back in a moment. The parlor doors are wide open."

Elias took Celia's hand before she realized what he intended. He tugged her over to the sofa. "Sit, Celia. Your mother is right. You are as pale as milk. Are you certain you are well?"

As she lowered herself to the seat, she snatched her hands out to grasp his. "Of course I am not well," she hissed after a glance at the doors. "Finding our agreed-upon act quite difficult. But worry not, I shall conceal my weakness and play the part accordingly." She looked away, determined not to let him see her. She could not bear the revulsion she knew she would find in his gaze.

Gransdon entered with the tea and served them. "Will that be all, Your Grace?"

ve must lady?" he asked.

." "Her Grace wishes to take her tea in her private sitting room, Elias was Celia sampled hers, wishing it was brandy.

"Yes, my lady. I shall see to it." The butler strode out and closed the doors that the duchess had previously left open.

"Shall I open them?" Elias asked quietly.

wn. As Celia lowered her cup to its saucer, clenching her teeth, as her treacherer made the porcelain rattle. She set it on the table beside her, clutching her hands in her lap, and kept her gaze lowered. "Whatever you wish."

"I wish for you to be happy," he said softly. "But I fear that with a few more days' will never be."

She found both his tone and his words not only confusing but horrendously cruel. Was that his intent? To toy with her emotions through the time they were together? To torment her all the way to the gallows? She pulled in a deep breath and released it, bracing herself for whatever he would say next. She focused on her hands in her lap.

"Can you ever forgive me, Celia?"

ing for "Forgive you?" She eyed him, bracing herself for the lash of truth she needed words.

"I begged you to trust me, and when you did, I failed you." Elias touched her cheek with such excruciating tenderness that she shied away. "I am more sorry than you will ever know. Please try to find it in your heart to forgive me."

This had to be a terrible game. He was trying to trick her into lowering her guard again, so he could crush her hopes even harder. Like a starving animal with the promise of food.

gently "Forgiveness was not a part of our bargain, my lord." She cleared her pale throat, damning herself for allowing her emotions to choke her. "Our bargain was marriage, a peaceful goodbye to my mother, and then your freedom of his with my eventual imprisonment and hanging." She twitched a shrug. "I am I said before, I shall endeavor to become more convincing so everyone will believe we are genuine."

d not to He leaned forward and peered up into her face. "I truly am begging for forgiveness for being such a callous fool. This is not some cruel punishment I would never do that. And I shall never have freedom from you, Celia. I will never want it. My heart will always be yours."



She finally lifted her gaze to his. "I do not believe you," she said. "Please." never will."

"Then I shall spend the rest of my days trying to convince you of my sincerity." His expression was an unreadable mask, and his eyes were dark and swirling with shadows.

She ached to believe him but couldn't. This was a trap. He was the hunter. She was the fox. And he was determined to punish her by ripping her apart into even smaller shreds. It was time to change the subject to something safe.

Cold, hard details. She handled details much better than feelings. "Where shall we live once we marry?"

He studied her for a moment, then said, "Wherever you and your mother wish to live. I assumed your mother would live with us. Did I assume correctly?"

"Yes." Celia retrieved her cup but left the saucer on the table. Be careful not to avoid the rattle. After a small sip, she set it back down. "If it is all right with you, it would be easier for Mama to live here. She is doing quite well here. I am unsure how well she would weather another move. Even one as simple as moving to a different street in London."

"Then we shall live here." He sat there, staring at her so long that she felt her skin crawl.

She forced herself to meet his stare with a cold, hard gaze. "What?"

"I would like to bring my staff here. My housekeeper, Mrs. Carson, and the maid, Sarah, have been with me for years. I have a soft heart to let them go."

"I did not realize your lordship had a heart." She probably should have said that, but there it was.

His chiseled jaw hardened even more, and his nostrils flared. He shook his head. "I deserved that and accept it fully."

"By all means, bring your staff here." Celia rose and went to the window overlooking the street, but saw nothing but her dismal future. "Mrs. Carson, my housekeeper, plans to leave us at the end of the week to care for her sister. Your Mrs. Camp can replace her."

The heat of him embraced her, warning of his presence directly behind her. The man moved as silently as the deadly predator that he was. "I do not like Mrs. Camp," he said. "She mothers everyone."

Celia didn't bother answering, just stared through the lacy curtain

“And Idreary day that perfectly mirrored her feelings.

Taking hold of her by the shoulders, Elias gently turned her, then t of myhands in his and went down on one knee. “I beg your forgiveness re darkprecious one. I was a pompous, judgmental, cold-hearted bastard to y

I will regret it for the rest of my life. Please, Celia. I do not say this hound,you or give you false hope. I say it because I love you, and I am asha heart tothe way I behaved.”

g safer. Her blasted tears slipped free no matter how hard she blinked “Wherethem back. “Damn!” She yanked her hands out of his and swiped at the

Elias remained on his knee, looking up at her with such a con motherexpression that she ached to drop onto the floor and dive into his ar assumeshe didn’t. She could not trust him again. Not yet.

She sniffed and cleared her throat. “Forgive my language, my lord. etter to “I can forgive anything as long as you can find it in your heart to

able tome.” Still on one knee, he slipped his hand inside his coat and pulled ll, but Ilock of hair she had given him. “I want this to symbolize our eternal

mple ashe said. “Not that heartless bargain I should have shouted down rath agreed to.” He reached into his pocket again and drew out a dark blue

it madebox. “For you, my lady. To mark the bargain I should have insisted The uniting of our lives forever and a day.”

” Celia stared down at it, wanting so badly for everything he said to np, herRather than take it, she pressed her hand to the base of her throat and en’t theher heart to stop pounding so hard and fast. “What is it?”

His mouth set in a hard line, Elias eased open the box’s lid and hel uld notto her. “I had it made for you. Another reason I delayed my visit until t

The necklace resting on the satin pillow inside the box took her bowedaway. Gold beadwork bordered the heart-shaped locket covere

delicately frosted grape leaves and tiny bunches of golden grapes. windowacross the widest part of the gold heart was a garland of gemstones.

arcourt, “It is so beautiful,” she said in a breathless whisper. for her “The gemstones have meaning. The order they are in.” Elias re

pointed them out. “Ruby, emerald, garnet, aquamarine, ruby aga behinddiamond. Their first letters are an acrostic that spells REGARD.

believemeans *to see* and also *love*. This locket means *I saw you and fell in lo* lifted it out of the box by its golden chain. “Inside is a lock of my h

s at thealso part of the curl that you gave me.” The longing in his eyes besec

to believe him.

look her She hurried to turn away, unready to face what she saw in his eyes.  
:ss, myon me, please?"

ou, and "Gladly, my love." He placed it around her neck.

to trick As his fingers brushed her nape, tingles shot through her, mak  
med ofdraw in a quick breath. After the locket fell in place between her brea

warmed to her flesh, Elias pressed the tenderest of kisses to the back  
to holdneck. "I love you, Celia," he whispered. "Please try to love me again."

em. "I want to," she said before she could stop herself. "But I am so aft

vincing He gently turned her into his embrace. "I will never betray yo  
ns. Butagain. Not ever."

She rested her hands on his chest and stared up at him, her  
" handsome panther, the man who could either uplift her or destroy her.

forgiveabout your firm? Your integrity as a solicitor?"

out the "That is not my greatest worry," he said softly.

union," "And what is your greatest worry?"

er than "Losing you forever."

e velvet "If this is not real—"

d upon. He silenced her with a kiss that sent her headlong into an overw  
conflict of doubts and the aching need to be loved. His arms tightened

be real.her, molding her against his hard, muscular body and making her y  
l willedsink into his embrace and never emerge again. He tasted of tru

sincerity, but above all, he tasted of danger. He knew all her secrets. D  
d it outforgive him and allow him access to her battered heart yet again?

today." "I love you," he rasped across her lips, breathing his emotions in  
: breath"Love me again, Celia. Love me."

d with She caught his face between her hands and held him there, her  
Drapedmere inches from his. Staring into his eyes, she willed him to unders

have never trusted easily. My survival and that of my mother deper  
taking the greatest care. When I trusted you with not only our truth

ose andheart—"

in, and He cupped her face between his hands just as she held his. "I know  
Regardcan do is continue to beg you for forgiveness."

ve." He "No," she said, searching his eyes for the slightest hint of betray  
air andnot beg. My forgiveness will be yours once I learn I can trust you again

hed her A hint of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Will you gi

the rest of your life to teach you?"

"Put it "For now," she said softly, then sealed the oath with another kiss.

The loud crack of the front door's knocker against the brass plate  
them apart. Celia patted her hair and smoothed the wrinkles out of her  
ing herShe rushed to the window and peered through the lace at the carriage  
ists andof the house. "I am not familiar with that crest, are you?"

of her Elias joined her, then groaned. "Brace yourself, my lioness. It app  
esteemed Lady Bournebridge has come to call."

aid." "Oh, good heavens. Mama finds that woman unbearable, and  
ur trustBournebridge is certain to be even more unpleasant since Mama n  
missed her ball but also declined to attend the woman's Venetian bre  
darklyCelia caught Elias by the arm and tugged him toward the other end  
"Whatroom. "That narrow door over there is a rather winding route to the ki  
if you wish to escape."

"I will not leave you and your mother at the mercy of that woma  
ushered her back to her seat, then took his. "We are doing nothing me  
having a pleasant visit over tea. Gransdon has surely gone to fetc  
mother."

ielming As soon as they settled into their chairs, the duchess rushed in thro  
aroundnarrow door Celia had just pointed out. "I cannot imagine why that wo  
earn tocoming here." She shot an irritated glance at Gransdon where he waite  
ith anddouble doors leading into the hallway and gave him a sharp nod. "I w  
are sheladies had waited to attend the Royal Academy's exhibition," she tol

"When meeting Lady Bournebridge, it is important to have ampl  
to her.present."

"Lady Bournebridge and her daughter, Lady Temperance," Gi  
mouthannounced, then stepped aside and bowed.

tand. "I The two swept into the parlor, casting a critical eye all around a  
ided onplace might not be worthy of them. Elias rose to his feet but remaine  
but myas Celia and her mother stepped forward to greet the unwelcome visito

"Lady Bournebridge, Lady Temperance, how good of you to cal  
w. All Iduchess gracefully directed their attention to Elias. "Allow me to in  
you to Lord Raines."

al. "Do Lady Temperance curtsied, but her mother did not. Lady Bourn  
n." gave him an up-and-down scowl as if sizing him for a roasting pan  
rant meRaines, yes. He is my husband's solicitor." She granted him a tip of h

when he bowed.

“And this is my daughter, Lady Cecilia,” the duchess continued. She jolted. “Your daughter?” Lady Bournebridge perked like a cat spotting a dress mouse. “According to many at the Whitfields’ gathering, this lovely in front lady was Miss Celia Bening, your companion.”

Celia bit the inside of her cheek so hard that she tasted blood. Before her mother could counter Lady Bournebridge’s rather ineffective attack with a firm parry, she fluttered away the words as if they were a swarm of bees. Lady Bournebridge would not consider the Whitfield party a reliable source for anything, not only because Mama had fainted dead away from the overly crowded room and she had to take a breakfast sustenance to ease her. Before Lady Bournebridge could counter Celia’s attack, she directed them to the sofa while the rest of them returned to the kitchen. “Do join us for tea. Gransdon will soon be in with additional settings.”

After settling among the cushions like a fat, nesting hen, Lady Bournebridge turned to Celia’s mother. “How dreadful for you at the time. Are you fully recovered now?”

“Oh yes, quite recovered,” the duchess answered with a smug nod that made Celia proud.

“Well, you know,” Lady Bournebridge drawled, “I was quite comfortable when you failed to attend my ball after confirming, and then when you declined the invitation to my Venetian breakfast, I was certain some misunderstanding had arisen. I simply had to visit to ensure all was well with you and Celia. “Quite well,” the duchess said. “Traveling from Germany simply seems to be more taxing than I anticipated. Do forgive me for not easing you with a note of explanation.”

Lady Bournebridge gave a rude, dismissive smirk. “Think nothing of it, Your Grace. You were clearly overtaxed by travel. Very understandable if the Gransdon and Friedrich entered with more tea and additional plates of silent cakes. They served the ladies with a quiet efficiency that has impressed me. Bournebridge and her daughter watching them as they left the room.

“Excellent servants are so hard to find of late.” Lady Bournebridge introduced her tea as if testing it for poison. With a pained puckering of her mouth, she left Celia wondering if the woman was about to choke, she turned back to the duchess. “This is my Temperance’s first Season, and we have been very pleased so far.” She slid a wicked glance Celia’s way. “Everyone at the Whitfields’ soiree must have thought your Cecilia a companion sir

dressed so modestly, and has neither openly come out for the Seas been presented at court.”

Before her mother could respond, Celia laughed and leaned forward. “With this being my first time to London since I was a child, I wanted to survey the hunting grounds before joining the fray.” She took a slow sip of her tea and allowed herself a smile. “I prefer to be the hound rather than the fox.”

Lady Bournebridge stretched back as though Celia had slapped her. Poor of her spindly brows arched almost to her hairline. “I see,” she said, looking at Celia as she sipped her tea.

“And my Cecilia has already found love,” the duchess said. With an affectionate smile, she held out her hand. “Lord Raines has asked for Cecilia’s hand, and we have accepted.”

Lady Temperance snorted and tittered a rude laugh, before making a show of modestly turning her face aside.

“Something wrong with your tea?” Celia asked while fighting the urge to lob her cup at the rat-faced little chit.

“My Temperance is quite delicate,” Lady Bournebridge hurriedly interjected. She fixed her daughter with a pointed look, then turned back to Celia. “She sometimes complains the temperature of the beverage isn’t a suitable match or quite up to standard which one would normally desire.”

If the tea didn’t choke the insufferable little ape leader and her mother, Celia would. How dare they sit there and openly insult Elias by implying it wasn’t good enough for her to marry?

“Poor dear. Perhaps if she traveled more, her palate would be more discerning to recognize exemplary quality when it is presented—rather than judge the tea simply by its *title*,” the duchess said, her tone dripping with sarcasm. “*Touché, Mama*,” Celia politely hid her smile behind her cup.

Elias sat there openly grinning, obviously enjoying the entertainment. “Perhaps we should go,” Lady Bournebridge said, her expression more than usual. “We simply wished to call after that horrid incident at the Whitfields’.” She set her tea on the table and gave an impatient flip of her hand at her daughter. “It is good to see you quite recovered and to know that misunderstandings exist between us.” With an imperious sneer that appeared to be meant as a smile, she nodded first at Elias, then at Celia.

son nor congratulations. Much happiness to you both.”

“Thank you, Lady Bournebridge,” Elias said with a mocking bow  
ward a taking Celia’s hand and pressing a kiss to it. “And may Lady Tempe  
rst visit hunt be as successful as my Celia’s.”

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wicked high-pitched yip as though someone had pinched her. “Good day to a  
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“Good,” Elias said with a proud jutting of his chin. “I want ever  
With an know.”

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congratulations. Much happiness to you both.”

“Thank you, Lady Bournebridge,” Elias said with a mocking bow before taking Celia’s hand and pressing a kiss to it. “And may Lady Temperance’s hunt be as successful as my Celia’s.”

Lady Bournebridge’s eyes flared wide, and Lady Temperance emitted a high-pitched yip as though someone had pinched her. “Good day to all,” the lady haughtily said before they both stormed from the room.

“You have to marry now,” Celia’s mother said with a faint smile. “We shall probably read all about your engagement in tomorrow’s gossip sheets.”

“Good,” Elias said with a proud jutting of his chin. “I want everyone to know.”

Celia pressed a hand over the lovely golden locket and prayed he truly meant it—and that somehow, he would find a way to come to terms with her being the true Duke of Hasterton.





## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ELIAS RAN A finger behind the over-starched cravat that was about to smother him. Mrs. Camp had outdone herself upon learning that today was the auspicious day of the wedding. She had cleaned, starched, and brushed his clothes within an inch of their lives, and clapped her approval when she presented him with an exquisite waistcoat whose pattern possessed a certain sheen. Along with the new waistcoat came a fresh shirt of the finest fabric, adorned with the ruffled front and cuffs that he hated.

“You settled the vicar in the drawing room with the others?” he asked his brother while shrugging on the waistcoat.

“Yes. And he is still sober. So far.” Monty stepped back and nodded in approval as Elias presented himself before donning his coat. “But I cannot guarantee for how long. After all, Reverend Neville has been retired for some time and enjoys his evening brandies immensely.”

“Yes, but you said the man was a favorite of our mother and Father. I miss him.” Elias smiled at his reflection in the mirror. “The perfect clergyman for this day.”

“Mrs. Neville has promised to keep him focused and also brought along her grandson, the newest vicar of our old parish, and his wife to the ceremony. Everything is properly recorded in the register.”

Elias stopped tugging at his clothes and faced his brother. “And you are generous enough to house them for the night in your townhouse. What would the world do without you, brother?”

“You would founder miserably.” Monty frowned at Elias’s cravat and adjusted it. “Gads, man. You should have allowed me to loan you a cravat. I would have tied that thing properly.” He threw up his hands as if there was no hope for it. “By the way, while I hate to impart bad news on this good day, you do realize the two of you have caused quite the stir. Polite society does not appreciate a solicitor, even one as esteemed as yourself, snatching up one of its wealthiest darlings.”

“I assumed there would be talk.” Elias checked his timepiece, grinning at the memory of Celia and her mother giving no quarter to the odious Bournebridge and her equally unpleasant daughter. Monty’s unimpressed expression gave him pause. “Out with it, man. I prefer to be forewarned.”

“One displeased old dowry hunter, Lord Mabryton, approached me in the club to confirm the rumor, and two other drowning-in-debt lords mentioned it during the recess at yesterday’s session.” Monty’s concerned scowl had deepened even more. “I fear such discussions may cause issues when we bring his letters patent to Parliament.”

Monty “We shall have to bide our time, then. Wait for the *ton* to shift their silvery attention elsewhere.” Elias hated the thought of delaying their carefully plotted course. He wanted Celia legally safe and proclaimed the legitimate heir to the empire she and her mother had created.

Monty clapped him on the shoulder. “Forgive me. I should not have brought up such troublesome worries on today of all days.” He adjusted his ruffles at Elias’s wrist. “And all is well now between yourself and your sister—cannot you love?”

“Not entirely well, but much improved.” Elias offered a rueful look and sadly shook his head. “I have learned a painful lesson, brother. Trust is hard-earned over time, and once lost, it is even more difficult to reclaim.”

He squared his shoulders, pulled his timepiece from his pocket, and checked it again. Almost time. An excited edginess filled him. The warring tongues of the *ton* were right—Lady Cecilia was most definitely abiding in her station. But no one could ever claim to love her more than he did.

“Mother’s ring will bring you luck.” Monty patted his pocket. “You are admiring yourself in the mirror.”

“Are you quite certain you wish me to use it?” While he appreciated his brother’s offer of their mother’s ring, Elias couldn’t help but feel undervalued and of the honor. By rights, the ring should go to Monty’s future wife—worlds. He the rogue decided to choose one.

“Absolutely, old boy.” Monty smoothed back his hair, then turned and glided out the door with a curt nod. “I may never marry.” He ushered Elias to the Society. “However, it is now time for you to do so.”

Elias led the way, forcing himself to maintain a composed demeanor when he would much rather dash down to the drawing room and sweeten

ming atop into his arms.

is Lady When he and Monty stepped through the double doors of the room usually of disappointment filled him. His precious lioness had yet to descend to her suite. A subtle glance revealed everyone else was already seated beaming with happiness. Lady Rydleshire and the dowager Marchioness at the Ardsmere flanked the dowager duchess. Celia's chosen sisters, as she affectionately referred to them, Lady Sophie and Lady Ardsmere, excitedly perched on the edge of their seats closest to the drawing room doors.

ing the The retired Reverend Neville, his wife, grandson, and granddaughter lined up in front of the windows. They greeted Elias with happy nods. He returned their attention to the entrance flanked by a pair of large vases artfully with sprays of ivy and delicate pink rosebuds just beginning to open.

itimate An excited expectancy filled the room, but as each minute ticked the waiting took on a life of its own, changing into a worrisome uncertainty. The reverend cleared his throat and barely tipped an inquisitive nod toward the duchess's direction.

ur lady "Nervous bride." The duchess leaned forward and eyed the doorway willing Celia to appear. "I feel sure she will join us soon." She reset her hands and clasped hands in her lap and looked to Lady Sophie. "Sophie, was she not ready when you left her?"

Lady Sophie gave a quick nod. "Yes, Your Grace. Lady Cecilia is ready, and would be right down after she changed her shoes for the third time." She gave a congratulatory smile Elias's way. "She wanted everything to be perfect for her husband-to-be."

Perfection was one thing. This waiting was unnecessary torture. Elias resettled his stance and glanced toward the hallway again. Had she changed her mind? Decided to jilt him for revenge? No. Surely not. Her kisses and his wistfulness in her pale green eyes had confirmed her willingness to serve and start again.

never Monty cleared his throat, disappeared into the hallway briefly, and returned to his place beside Elias with a shake of his head. "No sign toward brother," he said quietly.

oward. Elias had had enough. "I'm going upstairs to see about her. Some things are terribly wrong. I feel it." He exited the drawing room and charged up the stairs, taking the steps two at a time. A glance back told him Monty, Lady Sophie, and Lady Ardsmere followed, but he didn't slow. An inc

dread pounded through him, warning that all was not well.

He rapped on the door to her private sitting room, hitting it so hard it rattled the hinges. "Celia?" When only silence answered, he pushed the door open and fears mounting higher at the emptiness he found within. He strode to the bedroom door and pounded on it. "Celia! Are you all right?"

Still no answer. He tried the latch and discovered it locked. "Celia, please at least answer so I know you are not unwell."

"She was fine earlier, and quite excited," Lady Sophie called out to her wife behind him.

"Something is wrong." Elias waved them off. "Stand back. I am busy filling it down."

Monty shielded the ladies as he shuffled them away.

Fueled by a raging protectiveness he had never known before, Elias kicked the door open, splintering the frame and leaving it hanging by a sliver in the hinge. "Celia!" he bellowed as he surged into the room.

It was empty and entirely too disheveled for his liking. He turned away as if Sophie, and his gut clenched with a certainty he wished he could deny. The young woman's pallor and wide eyes confirmed that the room had not been nearly this way when she left Celia a short time ago.

"I want everyone in this household brought to the drawing room immediately. Every servant. Every guest. Every person who darkened the halls of the castle since we last saw Celia. No one is to leave this property under any circumstances."

"I shall see to it," Monty said. He nodded toward the exit. "Ladies, follow me. Elias, you."

Elias carefully moved around the bedroom, then checked the door and the room, scrutinizing every detail. The curtains hanging from the frame of the four-poster bed were not neatly tied back, as would be usual for this

day. At least, only one of them was. The other hung at an odd angle, though almost yanked down. The windows were shut and would not be a feasible entry or exit from this height. And, as usual for London, it was raining. Neither the curtains nor the floors were the least bit wet. Whatever had become of Celia had originated from within the household, and from the state of the room, it had not happened with her consent. Fury set his teeth, Lady boiling.

He examined the door latch closer, noting it could be locked from

side, but only with a key. Celia and the housekeeper should be the only persons in possession of one. A forlorn satin slipper of the palest pink was inside, its side beside the shattered opening into the sitting room. He crouched to the left, clenching his jaw until it ached. One side of the precious shoe was as though it had been dragged on the floor and treated roughly. A black stain! Atstained the toe. He snatched it up and studied it closer. A pungency identified it. Shoe polish. With a rub of his thumb, the mark smeared across the material. Whoever had taken Celia had just polished their boots or shoes.

With the dainty shoe in hand, he stormed downstairs and strode into the breakfast room. All eyes turned to him. He showed the slipper to Lady Sophie.  
“Was she wearing this when you left her?”

Her eyes filling with tears, Lady Sophie clutched a handkerchief to her face, Elias mouth and sobbed. Confirmation enough for Elias.

A single “Who has taken my baby?” Duchess Thea’s enraged wail cut through the room. She stamped her gleaming cane hard against the floor as she turned to Lady Sophie toward the servants. “Who has come into this house and betrayed me to my daughter? The dared hurt my Celia?”

Gransdon turned and glowered down the line of those assigned to the household in order. “You will each give Her Grace an account of yourselves throughout this day,” he growled. “Every moment up until the end of this very last minute!”

With a furious scowl, Mrs. Camp turned, tugged her Henry out of the way, and glared at the wide-eyed maids, footmen, gardener, and coachmen, after “Where are the grooms and coachman?” she asked.

Elias stepped forward, weighing their expressions, noting their nervousness, and shuffling in place. It hit him that one very familiar face was missing. “Where is Friedrich?”

The duchess whacked her cane against the wall, appearing ready to strike, as she demanded the information out of some unlucky soul. “Where is he?”

Gransdon stepped out of line again and paced back and forth in front of the other servants. He stopped in front of the footman named Reginald. “You were with Friedrich earlier, setting up the room for the seating in the dining room and removing the dividing wall between the dining room and the anteroom. Where is he?”

The tall, spindly young man stood there, opening and closing his mouth as if he were a fish out of water. “Not certain, Mr. Gransdon. Last I saw of him,

he only gone to fetch another table from storage. Told me to finish up here  
k lay on drawing room and that he would tidy up the rest.” He proffered a  
l beside bow to the duchess. “I swear, Your Grace. That was last I saw of him  
s frayed been nowhere near Lady Cecilia all day.” He shook his head so hard  
k mark stumbled sideways. “I would never hurt her ladyship, Your Grace. No  
entified amount of money.”

oss the “Money,” Elias repeated. That had to be what this was about. “I w  
es. man found, and I want the Bow Street Runners sent for. Ask fo  
into the Portney.”

Sophie. “And Thomas Elkin,” the duchess added. She whacked her cane  
the wall again. “Do it now!”

to her Mrs. Camp shoved Henry toward the door. After the boy bobbed h  
at Elias, he took off like a shot.

ugh the Elias turned to Monty. “Have your coachman get with the gro  
ndered search the stable and check for missing horses.”

Who “I can show you the shorter way, Your Grace.” Reginald stepped f  
and waited for permission to do so.

to keep Elias waved him on, and Monty rushed out after the footman, l  
ount of toward the back of the house.

til this “You. Gardener. Your name?” Elias pointed at the older ger  
clutching his hat and work gloves against his middle.

of the “Abraham, my lord. Abraham Mulderny.”

l cook. “It is my understanding that Friedrich helped you with certain area  
garden. Is that true?” Elias moved closer, glaring at the man who  
nervouseither unwilling or unable to look him in the eye. “You would do  
“Where answer honestly. I have no patience whatsoever at the moment.”

The man bobbed his head, then nervously scrubbed a gnarled hand  
to beathis sparse tufts of white hair. “That Friedrich boy built that there wate  
the corner where it stayed too wet for anything to grow.” He twisted  
front of and gloves as if trying to wring them out. “But that was all. That one th  
ald and He shook his head and looked ready to spit. “That one didn’t much c  
p extradigging in the dirt or planting. Just wanted to build stuff that ain’t nev  
e parlordone afore so he could tell you how smart he was. Awful braggart, he

So the man probably not only wanted money but also crowing  
mouthabout what he had done. Elias turned to the duchess. “How long has F  
he had been in your employ?”

“Years.” The duchess frowned with a faraway look in her narrow, nervous eyes. “At least five or more. He was with us in Germany and—”

Elias held up a hand and stopped her. “We should speak in private, Your Grace.”

She nodded and turned to the ladies who seemed to Elias to be more than mere friends. “You know I trust them as my dearest sisters, but please avail yourselves of the food in the dining room or Jackroom.” A shuddering breath left her as she appeared to be struggling to maintain her composure. “We must all keep up our strength for when we meet against Celia and can proceed with the ceremony.”

Reverend Neville and his wife came forward, sympathy filling their faces. “We shall pray for Lady Cecilia’s quick and safe return, Your Grace,” they said. They turned in unison to Elias. “Have faith, my lord. Your lady is safe and sound.”

Damn right she would be, but Elias didn’t speak the vow aloud. He gave a perfunctory nod, then offered his arm to the duchess. “The library or parlor, Your Grace?”

“Library.” She took his arm and marked each of their steps with a light *ping* of her cane against the marble floor of the hallway.

Strangely enough, the maids had lit the candles in the room. When Elias found that somewhat odd, he decided to check into it later. At the moment, finding Celia was all that mattered.

He led the duchess to one of the more comfortable chairs in front of the fireplace, helped her settle into the seat, then crossed back to the door and closed it. “I need a drink, Your Grace. Would you like one?”

“Most definitely,” she said with a flick of her hand in the direction of the liquor cabinet. “Do help yourself, Lord Raines, and do not give me cause to accuse you of a stingy pour.”

As Elias poured a generous brandy for them both, he tossed a coin into the air—“look at her back over his shoulder. “Should we send for Dr. MacMadden?”

Her eyes flared with alarm as she pressed a trembling hand to her throat. “Do you fear Celia harmed?” Her voice broke, making Elias wince. “I had phrased the question in a more considerate manner. The woman is in a bad heart and was tormented enough as it was.”

“I do not fear Celia has been harmed,” he said, hoping that was true. “My concern was for you, Your Grace. This situation does not promote a

ing eyes.state for anyone—much less someone with a weakness of the heart.”

With a tight-jawed nod, the duchess accepted her drink from him and  
e, You seemed to accept his explanation. “We can send for Ian once the Boy

Runners arrive. I do not wish to send anyone else out of the household  
a great we have thoroughly questioned them as to their whereabouts, and what  
ist you, might know about Friedrich’s disappearance as well.”

dining Ian? Elias noted the duchess’s intimate use of the physician’s first  
ling to but chose not to mention it. That was none of his affair, and now was  
we find time to put his interest where it didn’t belong. All that mattered was

Celia. He settled in the chair beside the dowager, wishing he had  
r faces.himself a whisky instead of brandy. “You said Friedrich had been with  
ce,” he for over five years. In Germany?”

will be “Yes. At least that many. Likely more.” She kept her gaze locked  
hearth, as though mesmerized by the glowing coals of the dwindling

he gave “Mrs. Thacker, our housekeeper there, recommended him after he  
r or the entire family to consumption. Celia felt quite bad for him, and so did

both believed him to be close to her age, but according to Mrs. Thacker  
a hard was much older—at least ten years or more. As an act of charity, we could

give him a chance to prove himself.” She slowly shook her head  
le Eliastaking her focus from the fire. “It would seem that no good deed  
moment,unpunished, and misplaced trust is quite deadly.”

Elias shifted in the seat, wondering how much she knew of  
t of the Celia’s trust issues, but now was not the time for that discussion. “How  
or and does he know?” he asked quietly.

The duchess sipped her drink, then released a heavy sigh. “Servants  
n of the to know a great deal more than we wish for them to,” she said. “That  
ause to Celia and I always made a point of paying them well for their loyalty

locked eyes with him. “I fear he knows enough to force us to pay  
cerned silence in exchange for Celia’s safe return.”

only?” “Before I allow him to compromise Celia’s safety or yours—I value  
base of him.”

as wish “Good.” The duchess lifted her glass in a toast. “I want my precious  
n had a back. No matter the cost.”

A light knock on the door made Elias turn. “Enter.”

ie. “My Monty strode in with Jack Portney and Thomas Elkin, the two best  
healthy Street Runners, following in his wake. “The grooms report no horses n



I've set them and our coachmen into combing the stables, grounds and also attached alleyways." He nodded at the two Runners. "Forgive me for the street interruption, but I felt sure you would wish to speak to these gentlemen until immediately."

"Indeed, we do." Elias turned back to the duchess. "I trust Henry will send him for the doctor now?"

The dowager's troubled scowl turned almost thoughtful and deliberate. She shook her head. "No. Now that I have thought more about it, finding Friedrich was the one who fetched Dr. MacMadden the night I collapsed. Until we are certain his finding the physician was a completely independent occurrence, I do not wish for the man to be brought back into the household and be made aware of anything he doesn't already know. Moreover, on their own anyone connected to Friedrich runs quite thin at the moment."

Elias was beginning to understand how this shrewd woman had so successfully pulled off such an intricate charade for so many years. "I wish, Your Grace." He rose to his feet, too knotted up with anger and helplessness to sit any longer. The unknown tormented him. Was Celia's nose broken? Was she injured? What had Friedrich done to her?

"You feel certain the footman took her?" Mr. Elkin asked the duchess. "He is the only one in the household who did not report to the study when called. Why else would he go missing at the same time that Friedrich disappeared from her bedroom?" The duchess turned back to the coal grate. "He could have taken her," she said, almost growling out the words. "Because of my health, Celia and I have not exactly taken London by storm. This is why and only our closest friends are here with us today." She huffed a bit more. "I doubt very much the retired vicar and his family would even consider such a cruel kidnapping."

"Friedrich seemed overprotective for a footman," Elias said, more so than the Runners. "I bloodied the man's nose once when he burst in on a rather loud conversation between myself and Celia. Has he always been this way?"

The duchess resettled her grip on her cane's ornately decorated handle, making her knuckles whiten with the effort. "Friedrich was always protective of us both." Her mouth flattened into a hard line. "I once considered his blessing. But now it appears to have turned into a curse."

ds, and “Are you aware of any jib doors in the home, Your Grace?” Mr. I  
ve theasked. When the duchess shook her head, then closed her eyes as the  
ntlemendire need of silence, he turned to Elias. “Your brother said Lady Ceci  
last seen in her private suite. If there is a jib door in one of them, that  
Shall I explain how the footman got hold of her with no one’s notice. Mig  
give us a clue where he took her, since they’re on foot—what with no  
:finitelyor carriages being gone.”

about it, “And on such a stormy evening,” Mr. Elkin interjected, “if he too  
llapsed.streets with her, there would be few people to notice and far too  
nocentshadows he could put to good use. I shall send for more men to aid  
to thissearch. We must cover this area as quickly as possible. Time is  
My trustessence.”

Elias crouched beside the duchess, loath to plague her with  
an hadquestions but knowing it had to be done. “Forgive me, Your Grace,  
As youyou know if any of the townhouse’s construction floor plans or draft  
lannedstill be here in the library? Master Hodgely said your husband commi  
a alive?this home to be built as a wedding present. Would he have kept the pla

She lifted her head and frowned at the memory. “Edmund would  
ess. kept them. But I have no idea where they might be.” She closed h  
rawingagain, but a tear slipped free and rolled down her cheek. “Celia would  
at CeliaThis room was her haven.”

s in the Elias flagged Monty over. “Her Grace needs comfort that I fear v  
No onecannot give her. Would you be good enough to see her into the dining  
words.Her ladies are there. They will take far better care of her than we can.”

r storm, With a gentle nod, Monty bent and whispered something in the du  
r snort.ear that somehow drew a teary-eyed smile from her. She allowed him  
eive offer to her feet and tuck her hand into the crook of his arm. Before mo  
the door, she looked at Elias. “You will keep me *fully* informed?”

e to her “I swear it, Your Grace.”

in on a She drew herself up as if gathering every last shred of coura  
en thatpossessed. “Very good. I shall be in the dining room.”

As soon as the door clicked shut behind them, Elias turned back  
handle,Bow Street Runners. “Lady Cecilia has to be alive. How else could t  
protectiveget a ransom?”

l that a The men’s grim expressions offered him no comfort.

Mr. Portney ambled over to a cabinet that held at least a dozen c

Portney narrow drawers—the sort of drawers that might hold collections of rough in large papers. “It depends on his intentions,” he said. “Or if he’s gone, Cecilia was—” “That is why we must work fast.” Mr. Elkins took the candle from the desk over to the unusual cabinet and held it above each drawer as he pulled them open. While thumbing through what turned out to be a collection of useless maps, he paused and scowled at Elias. “Do you have any notion how long the man was with them?”

“Over five years.” Elias lit another candle and headed for the door. “I’ll get many more men for the additional men,” he told Mr. Portney. “I trust him. And in the meantime, I shall be upstairs, searching Lady Cecilia’s rooms again. If the bastard has to have hidden her here on the premises. In this part of the house, it would be too difficult to take her anywhere else without someone noticing.” Without waiting for a response, he shielded the candle’s flame but hurried up the stairs. The storm’s gloom and the evening hours had brought a bleakness with them. Long, cold shadows shrouded everything. When he reached Celia’s sitting room, he lit every precious beeswax candle he could find. Damn the cost of them. He needed light, and prayed that wherever Celia was, she had light too and was unharmed.

He walked around the perimeter of the room, running his hand along the walls. What he couldn’t see, he would feel. The slightest bump or bump would reveal what he sought—the hidden door the devil had used.

Disappointment churned along with his building frustration, as though the room held no secrets to share.

Then he remembered the locked bedroom door. Either the bedroom or the dressing room had to possess a way to a concealed passage. It made sense to help. Many townhouses contained such an arrangement so the servants could move about and tend to their duties with as little bother to their employers as possible, unseen and unheard as they carried out their master or mistress’s every whim.

The bedroom walls proved as solid and unyielding as the adjoining dressing room. He lit a fresh candle and headed for the dressing room but stopped before passing through the door. Was that a poorly matched seam in the vibrant blue and white willow tree pattern decorating the walls above the solid white wainscoting?

Bringing the light closer, he discovered the seam perfectly met where the wood panels abutted each other. This was the door. He shoved again.

nap gave the slightest bit but failed to open into the space on the other side.” Friedrich had either blocked it or the thing had jammed. Or perhaps from the other side, it somehow opened out into the room and as Mr. then be pulled shut again from inside the passage.

to be a With a careful, bouncing shove, the jib door clicked, then opened and he was able to be pulled out the rest of the way.

He entered the musty space and paused, listening for the slightest sound. Holding the candle high, he noted it was in fact a passage leading to a room, not merely extra storage or a priest hole for safe hiding. In white paint on the wall, there was a circle with a cross extending out from the bottom rim. Friedrich had marked the door with the gender symbol “female.” Apparently, the footman was more educated than he let on.

Elias crouched and shined the light on the floor. Scuffed marks were visible through the dust, creating fresh tracks that revealed the bastard had gone this way. No one had used the passage until recently—until Friedrich.

Elias straightened and stared into the darkness the lone candle for a moment to illuminate. He needed a weapon before he gave chase. A frustrated sigh escaped him. His double-barrel flintlock, a gift from a slightly dubious merchant, had yet to be moved to the townhouse, since he had not thought to do so anytime soon. He strode back into the bedroom in search of something to use for defense besides his fists.

The iron poker on the hearth held promise. He snatched it up and ran back into the passage. His Celia would be back in his arms before the senseless fight ended.

move  
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first it. It

gave the slightest bit but failed to open into the space on the other side. Friedrich had either blocked it or the thing had jammed. Or perhaps, rather than swing into the space, it somehow opened out into the room and could then be pulled shut again from inside the passage.

With a careful, bouncing shove, the jib door clicked, then opened enough to be pulled out the rest of the way.

He entered the musty space and paused, listening for the slightest hint of a sound. Holding the candle high, he noted it was in fact a passage and not merely extra storage or a priest hole for safe hiding. In white paint that had dripped and run down the wall was a circle with a cross extending out of its bottom rim. Friedrich had marked the door with the gender symbol for the female. Apparently, the footman was more educated than he let anyone know.

Elias crouched and shined the light on the floor. Scuffed marks cut through the dust, creating fresh tracks that revealed the bastard had gone this way. No one had used the passage until recently—until Friedrich.

Elias straightened and stared into the darkness the lone candle fought to illuminate. He needed a weapon before he gave chase. A frustrated huff escaped him. His double-barrel flintlock, a gift from a slightly dubious client, had yet to be moved to the townhouse, since he had not thought to need it anytime soon. He strode back into the bedroom in search of something else to use for defense besides his fists.

The iron poker on the hearth held promise. He snatched it up and rushed back into the passage. His Celia would be back in his arms before this day ended.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CELIA BIT HARDER into the cloth knotted between her teeth. Out of from kicking, thrashing, and trying to scream through the gag, she glared at Friedrich. She took great pride in the deep, bloody scratches she had made down his face, and only wished she had clawed him more. It was her sincerest hope his wounds would be clearly visible from the gallows. He would know that Lady Cecilia Tuttcliffe relinquished nothing without a fight.

The sorry blackguard had the audacity to wink at her. “Our children will be fierce.” He hooked a finger in a jug and drank before stowing it back in the shadows at the foot of the cot he had unceremoniously dumped her in. He then lashed her to the cot when she tried to escape.

“As soon as you see reason, I will remove the ropes and gag.” He moved a short barrel closer to the wooden crate beside the bed and sat on it. A sputtering tallow candle gave out very little light in the tight, dingy space. The room looked as though it had been carved out of the earth with a spade. It had the feel of a root cellar or some such storage, considering it had a wooden door embedded in the wall between a pair of massive timber braces.

“All your money will be mine, and you will too.” He thumped his chest and smiled. “The wife I deserve. I will be the real duke instead of that fairytale man you and your mother made up.”

Was he actually that great of a fool? To think he would become the duke by marrying her? Celia looked away. She couldn’t stand the sight of his face any longer. At least he had allowed her to sit with her back against the wall before lashing her wrists to the cot’s corners.

And thankfully, he had wound the rope over her legs and under her arms, starting at the ankles and securing it all the way up to her waist by knotting it to the frame. She sent up a silent prayer of thanks that he appeared to have no intention of forcing himself upon her.

She almost gagged at the thought. Bile rose and burned in the back of her throat, which was already raw from trying to make herself heard through the gag.

gag. A scuffling sound, like the scratching of tiny claws somewhere in the shadows, made her draw into herself as much as the ropes allowed.

“Rats.” Friedrich tore a strip of cloth from the hem of his shirt, wet with whatever liquid the jug held, and dabbed it against his bleeding face. The way he cringed, the container contained some form of alcohol.

She hoped it burned like the dickens. “I hate you!” she slowly spat through the gag, exaggerating every syllable so he couldn’t fail to understand her.

The fool laughed. He pulled a long-bladed dagger from his belt and raked it at the dirt floor in some sort of ridiculous, repetitious game. “You will learn to love me as I love you.” He retrieved the blade then pointed it at her. “I have loved you since I first saw you all those years ago.” He then pulled the dagger from his chest. “You should thank me. I protect you now from a man unworthy of you.” His expression shifted to one that gave her chills. “You will share your wealth and learn to love me as your husband, or I will hang you.”

He said with a victorious dip of his chin. “Yes. That is what he shouted that day when I tried to save you, and you sent me away instead of helping me. A woman fixed him with a narrow-eyed glare. She would die in this hole at the end of a rope before she gave herself to this mad devil.

He returned to throwing his knife to make it stick straight up in the door. “You will discover I am a patient man,” he said. “I can wait as long as it takes for you to realize I am the one for you. My father taught me that women never know what is best until a man shows them.” He nodded. “You will see.”

Celia turned her face away from him again. The greasy smoke from the duke’s sputtering candle gave her an idea. Friedrich claimed to love her. If he did, in his own irrational way, then surely he would remove the gag. He acted as though she were choking. Then if she lied and agreed to marry him, he would bring her up out of this hole, and she could make her escape. Or both. Whatever it took to help Elias come to her rescue.

Because Elias would save her. She knew that with every fiber of her being. Her only concern was *how* Friedrich intended to marry her. What if the crazed fool thought committing the carnal act would make them husband and wife? She shuddered at that possibility.

“You are cold?” Friedrich rose. The low ceiling of the dank room

He made him bend slightly. He unrolled a blanket from the foot of the bed and tucked it up around her shoulders. "Better?"

She closed her eyes and turned her face away, frustration making her grind her teeth harder into the cloth.

"You are stubborn." Taking hold of her chin, he forced her to face him. "You are more stubborn. We will stay here as long as it takes."

Celia silently damned him to the hottest level of hell.

Friedrich pried open the small keg he had used as a seat and pulled out a cloth sack. From its depths, he pulled a half-eaten crust of bread that he had rescued from the scrap bin. He wafted it under her nose. "You do not eat until you are my wife. Understand?"

She glared at him, refusing him the satisfaction of the slightest reaction. "Understand?" he bellowed mere inches from her face.

She still didn't react, refusing to even blink even though her eyes were watering with the need to do so.

"You are mine!" he shouted again. His hot breath reeked, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of turning away.

A thunderous crash and the splintering of wood seemed to shake the room. Elias's enraged roar as he plowed into their midst shook the floorboards harder.

Celia's heart leapt as he brandished an iron rod like the mightiest of longswords.

Friedrich recovered entirely too quickly, dodging and lunging forward and slashing his knife at Elias. The low ceiling and close confines hindered the tall, muscular men.

Cringing and ducking as much as her bonds allowed, Celia braced herself. One or both of them could easily land on her. She yanked at her bonds as if she hoped her wrists burned and felt wet with a warm stickiness that had to be from his sweat. She didn't care. Unladylike or not, she champed at the bit to join the fray. Or at least to punish the beastly Friedrich for not only ruining her wedding dress but also for ruining her new dress and satin slippers.

Elias slammed the iron rod hard across the crazed footman's arm.

Friedrich grunted with the pain and staggered back. With his waist and arm tucked against his chest, he shifted his hold on the long-bladed sword and stabbed and slashed with abandon.

"You will die for this!" Elias roared with a resounding swing of the



ed and that caught Friedrich in his side.

The footman flung himself across Celia. He held the knife high as if ready to end her. "She either lives with me or dies with me," he growled.

Elias went still and backed up. "If you hurt her..."

him. "I..." "What?" Friedrich spat at him. "What will you do? You can't get yourself out of this one, Englishman. She is either mine or she is dead. No other option."

ed out a deafening gunfire exploded from the doorway. "I prefer my coffee must," Monty said, then fired again. "No one torments my brother or the dog. Not eat loves."

Pinned beneath Friedrich's crushing weight, Celia struggled to breathe. He held the knife raised above her as though determined to live or die. He carried through his threat. His only movement was the slightest tremor as he burned through her. She felt the disgusting warmth of his blood soaking her gown.

refused He slowly shifted his crazed scowl from Elias to her, bared his teeth, and forced out, "I meant what I said," before slashing downward.

ake the The searing burn made her throw back her head and sob a muffled cry through the gag.

"Celia!" Elias dove onto Friedrich and dragged the man off her.

tiest of She heard a sickening gurgle and then blessed silence. Silence had been good. It had to mean Elias had prevailed. She lifted her head and opened her eyes to his terrified gaze.

ed both "My beloved lioness," he breathlessly repeated over and over as he tore away the damnable gag. "Fetch the doctor," he shouted while she fought at her bonds with the very knife that had caused her so much pain. As she fought, she thought it was the same knife. Perhaps not. From the terrible burn on her chest, the blade might still be in her.

e battle "I knew you would come," she said, hoping he could hear her. The roar in her ears made it hard to tell how loud she was talking.

"I was going to find you if I had to tear London apart brick by brick."

"Am I going to die?" She closed her eyes. It took so much effort to breathe through the hurting, she had no strength left to keep her eyes open. The thought of dying angered her. She had spent all her life alone, in London, and allowing no one near her to protect the charade. She didn't want to die that way too. Elias had broken her heart at first. But now... "Pro-

will marry before I die.”

though “You will not die,” he said, his deep voice stern but as warm and comforting as his embrace. “I forbid it, Celia. Absolutely forbid it.”

“Promise we will marry as soon as you get me out of this hole. I would promise her that, this horrid pain would be so much easier to bear. I offer “I swear it, my precious one.” He gently slid his arms under her shoulders and legs. “Hold fast, my love. I know moving will cause you more pain and option,” must get you to your room.”

“And then we will marry,” she said through a cry of pain as he lifted her. “Before the doctor does anything. Before I die.” His arms tightened around her, and the tender brush of his kiss across her forehead made her feel safe until he “Promise me,” she whispered through the burning ache that pounded through her with every beat of her heart.

“I promise, my love. Only a little farther and we will be back in our bedroom.”

Then Celia pressed her face against his throat and concentrated on the reassuring scent of citrus, bergamot, and amber. The clean, sharp, yeasty notes always took her back to the garden. The feel of his skin against her. His heat of him as he rose above her, then joined with her, branding her with his delicious scent.

Worse pain shot through her as he kicked the door open and stepped into her bedroom. “I may be sick,” she warned. Her head spun and her stomach churned—and all the while her chest burned as though hot coals were piled upon her.

“Here is your bed, my love.” Elias gently lowered her onto the mattress and at least, then kissed her forehead again. “Hold fast, my courageous one.” He held her hand tightly, then shifted beside her.

Biting her lip against the terrible aching, she cracked open one eye. “A loud for everyone so we can marry.” She could no longer make out her surroundings. Everything was so dark and blurry. “And light more candles, please, please.” dark—and cold.” She let her eyes close again and vaguely sensed someone falling across her.

“A blanket, my love,” Elias whispered, brushing his lips against her living cheek. “Monty is fetching everyone. I do not mean to cause you more pain, but I need to change the cloth on your wound and check the bleeding. Please, please.” “Change it?” She puzzled over his wording. To change it meant

already used a compress on it. Had she blacked out and not realized it?  
rm and At a resurgence of pain, as though the wound had a cruel person  
its own and had gotten its second wind, a hitching groan escap  
.” If he “Damn,” she said. After the past few hours, she had the right t  
ar. profanity, and dared anyone to deny it.

oulders “My Celia!”

n, but I “Mama.” Celia smiled and breathed easier. “Is the reverend here to

“Yes, my darling, but you do not have my permission to die. I  
ted her. understand?” her mother said through a soft sob. “We can have the cer  
around once you heal. Dr. MacMaddenly is on his way.”

ier cry. “Now,” Celia whispered. “I do not want to die alone, and  
hrough promised.”

Muffled whisperings swirled around her, but she dared not risk c  
in your her eyes. She needed to conserve her energy for the vows.

“Elias?”

on his “I am here, my love.”

t sultry The warmth of his hand cradling hers as he sat on the bed bes  
st hers. brought her comfort. “Tell the vicar to get on with it,” she said, tr  
ier with sound stern but failing miserably.

“Reverend Neville?” Elias gently squeezed her hand, then kissed i  
ed into briefest ceremony possible, if you please.”

tomach “Do you, Cecilia Elizabeth Madeline Rose Bening Tuttcliffe, tak  
re piled Raines to be your lawfully wedded husband until death shall part you?

a man whose voice Celia didn’t recognize.

pillows, “I do,” she said, hoping everyone could hear her. The roaring in h  
ield her seemed to get louder.

“And do you, Elias Raines, take Cecilia Elizabeth Madeline Rose  
. “Send Tuttcliffe to be your lawfully wedded wife until death do you part?”  
is face. the same voice.

It is so “I do. And even beyond death, because she will never ha  
nething permission to leave me.” Elias’s mouth was so close to her cheek t  
warm breath tickled across her.

nst her Celia smiled as something slid onto her finger. A ring. Perhaps she  
re pain look at it later when she had less pain distracting her. And if she didn’t  
eding.” see it. Maybe her spirit could tarry long enough to glimpse it.

he had “I now pronounce you man and wife,” the reverend said, su

seeming in a greater hurry. "Let no man attempt to part that which C  
ality ofjoined. Kiss your bride, my lord, and then have her mark the register  
ed her she can."

o such "I love you, Celia. The doctor has arrived. Promise me you will  
live." Elias barely brushed his mouth across hers, and she vaguely  
aware of a quill between her fingers.

o?" "I love you, Elias. Help me mark the register. I don't have the stre  
Do you open my eyes." Her hand moved, then the quill went away, and her a  
remony once again at her side. "Tell Mama I am sorry, and that I love her."

"There is nothing to be sorry for," her mother said, her voice sound  
d Elias away.

"Everyone out," Dr. MacMaddenly said. "Now!"

opening At least, she thought it was the rude Scot barking like an angry dog  
her bed. But it didn't really matter now. She was not alone anymo  
sank into the darkness knowing that she was Mrs. Elias Raines.

ide her  
ying to



ELIAS KEPT HIS gaze locked on the slow, steady rise and fall of  
it. "The bandaged chest, smiling at the realization that his breathing had n  
itself with hers. He closed his eyes and sent up another prayer of tha  
e Elias she had survived the terrible ordeal. He had feared her doomed becaus  
"asked the blood. But Dr. MacMaddenly had approved of the wound blee  
much. The arrogant Scot had informed him that her bleeding clean  
er ears wound better than any splash of whisky could. Praise God that the  
part of the stabbing slash was closer to Celia's shoulder than her l  
Benign lungs.

"asked He opened his eyes and smiled at his precious bride, his fearless

Even though her wound had required quite a bit of stitching, the  
ive my seemed certain she would recover with no lasting effects. Even  
that his physician had accepted the offer of a room for the night.

Elias shifted with a silent huff of amusement at that. He had cau  
e would gruff old Scot glancing at the dowager duchess with a tenderness t  
t live to nothing to do with medicine. Elias would wager his favorite horse t  
good doctor had fallen completely under the dowager's spell.

iddenly

God has     He leaned over the bed and pressed the backs of his fingers to  
as bestforehead and couldn't help but smile. He too was helpless again

Hasterton women. Especially this one. Celia's cool, silken skin pleas  
fight toto no end. No fever meant no infection. Elias prayed it stayed that way  
became     The quietest scratching on the bedroom door drew his attention.  
glance at Celia's peaceful countenance, he went to the door and cra  
ngth toopen.

rm was     Monty motioned for him to come out and join him in the sitting ro  
"What is it?" Elias whispered. "When she awakes, I do not wish h  
ling faralone." He opened the door wider and straddled the threshold to keep  
tuned to his precious Celia.

"I have an idea." Monty's smug grin reminded Elias of when the  
; besideboys, and Monty was about to throw Father into a rage with his antics.  
re. She     Elias folded his arms and leaned back against the doorframe, kee  
ear perked for any sounds from within. "An idea?" he prompted,  
dreading to hear the answer.

Monty rubbed his hands together as if he had just won a large sur  
tables. "We have a body now."

Celia's     "What?" Elias blinked hard, trying to relieve the burning we  
atchedplaguing his eyes and muddling his brain.

aks that     "Friedrich wanted to be a peer. I say we let him. He can be the m  
e of allDuke of Hasterton." Monty's smug grin became a blinding smile. "An  
ding sothe poor duke was pummeled and shot by highwaymen while rushing  
sed themother's side after learning of the attack on his sister by a ne  
deepestblackguard outside Vauxhall Gardens, having his body laid out for v  
eart orbefore the burial is out of the question." He arched both brows, as the  
proud he was about to pop. "We can send for a funeral fu  
lioness.immediately." He cleared his throat and lowered his voice. "And pray  
doctortake offense, but I took the liberty of having Henry and Reginald  
so, theFriedrich to a spare bedroom. After all, the funeral furnisher would not  
to find the body of a duke down in the root cellar."

ight the     Elias glanced back into the bedroom, eyed Celia long enough to  
hat hadshe was still resting peacefully, then quietly stepped fully into the  
that theroom and closed the door—firmly. He turned to his brother, still tr  
process the mad scheme Monty had proposed. "Are you fucked in the  
he finally asked.

Celia's Monty hung his hands on his lapels as if slightly insulted. "I assure you I am quite sane, and if you think about it, this provides the perfect opportunity for me to hurry the patent before Parliament. If we propose the amendment at the same time that the duke's death is announced and also ensure that the story of the murder, as well as Lady Cecilia's terrible attack, is properly spread throughout the *ton*, the amendment will pass quickly because of sympathy for the duchess and her daughter."

"And how are we to explain all this not only to the Bow Street Magistrate but also to Dr. MacMaddenly? The more actors we include in this theatrical scheme, the greater the danger. Might I offer Friedrich's actions as a point?" Elias fixed his brother with a superior look, almost dreading what reply would be given. "They were extraordinarily illegal and immoral farce. Monty might come up with a better idea. Had his sibling always been this devious?"

"Let me handle everything," Monty assured him. "I am thinking of doing almost what you know, the better." He took hold of Elias by the shoulders and aimed at the bedroom door. "Back to your bride. Hurry, now. You don't wish to be awakened without you." He gently nudged his brother forward while opening the door.

Elias cast a disgruntled look back at Monty, then decided he was too weary to fight it. If his brother believed the scheme would work, then he would. He was merely thankful Monty was an ally and not an enemy. "I would since A weak "Elias?" made him toss those thoughts aside, and he rushed to his Celia.

"My love," he said, then gently scooped up her hand and kissed it, trying not to jostle her.

She gave him a sleepy smile. "Why do I feel so very heavy and...silly?"

"Dr. MacMaddenly got a generous dose of laudanum down you, and you do not completely blacked out. I am sure it's the effects of the drug. I would have moved when you awoke, if the pain was too great to bear, you could have expected. There is no need for you to suffer any more than you already have. I pulled his chair as close as he could and sat while still holding her hand. I ensure you wish for another dose?"

She eyed him with a sleepy gaze, then the slightest pucker appeared between her brows. "No. I do not care for this feeling at all, and I can live with the pain so far." She slowly lifted her hand as though to touch her finger. "I stopped partway and stared at the ring on her finger. "Oh my. I

"Are you beautiful," she said in the softest whisper, then blessed him with a opportunity smile. "So marrying you wasn't just a dream?"

"The same." "It was not, Mrs. Raines." He reverently touched the small, y of his aquamarine gemstone surrounded by tiny pearls in the gold setting. "Through my mother's ring. Monty said it would bring us luck."

"For the." "I shall properly thank him when next I see him." She grimaced a her eyes tightly while slightly arching her back.

"Runners." "Celia?" He jumped up and hovered over her, panic thrumming t eatrical him.

"case in." She eased in a deep breath and, just as carefully, let it ease b what an before relaxing back into the pillows. She opened her eyes and h next. surprised to see him hanging above her. "A shooting pain caught guard, but I think it's settled now, and I can bear it. Are you always g the less be so dramatic?"

"ied him." "I have the right to show ample concern about my wife." He settle h her to onto the edge of his seat, then huffed a disgruntled snort. "Dramatic. In

"easing." "And now you intend to pout?" She seemed to try a frow amusement still sparkled in her eyes. "I do not believe I have seen this vas too you before."

"perhaps." Allowing himself a sheepish grin, he lifted her hand again and hu 7. to his cheek. "I was so afraid I had lost you—again."

"shed to." "I knew you would come," she said softly, then looked away. down, I wondered if I would ever fully trust you again." She turned it while him and smiled. "I now know that answer, without a doubt."

He stared at her, struck mute with thankfulness.

"low?" "Elias?"

"before." "Yes, my love?"

"He said." "Come to bed, will you?" She gently touched his cheek and coax e more. with a faint smile. "After all, it is our wedding night, and you seem 7e." He weary."

"id." "Do." Elias swallowed hard and shamed himself for the sudden rush c burning through him. Celia was in no condition for his company in h ppeared "I do not wish to jostle you and cause you any pain."

"near the." "Move slow and careful," she told him, sounding like a patient ace but instructing a child. "I need you beside me, Elias. To feel your warmth it is so the safety of you here at my side. I want to breathe in your com

loving familiar scent with every breath. Please join me. You won't hurt me such terrible things while I slept. A twisted reliving of what happened round voice broke as she tugged on him. "And I dreamt you died. Please his was Come to bed and hold me. I need to feel you with me while I sleep."

He kissed her, gently at first, and then carefully deepened the contact and shut so she would know he would always protect her. "I am here for you, now. Always and forever."

through After shedding his boots and waistcoat, he rounded the bed and pulled back the covers.

back out "What about your shirt and pantaloons?" She squinted at him and looked critical frown. "They are surely ruined with all those stains."

me off He decided it was best not to tell her that her blood had caused staining to stains. He peeled off his shirt and tossed it aside. "Mrs. Camp works now with stains."

ed back "Pantaloons, my lord," she said as he started to climb into the bed. "Indeed." "My lady," he said, leaning across the bed. "Your insistence that I be naked has altered me dramatically, and you are in no condition to rely on the side of my state."

Her wicked smile nearly undid him. "I fear you have married a woman, my lord. One greedy to behold all her husband has to offer, and she can properly enjoy it or not." She smoothed her hand across the bed beside her. "After all, I will not be mending forever."

back to "Indeed." What a deliciously uncomfortable defeat. Elias straightened, unbuttoned the garment in question, and shoved it down to the floor. He slid into the bed beside her, he reveled in the way she wet her lips around him in a quick breath. "You do realize I shall have to address your groin once you are fully healed?"

ed him "I sincerely hope so, dear husband, because I enjoyed our *betrot* so very much in the garden immensely." She laced her fingers through his and held his hand tightly. "I wish I could lie on my side with my head on your chest. I am afraid to try it."

her bed. "Do not, or I shall exit this bed immediately. You must lie still so I can start the bleeding again." He kissed her hand, then pointedly placed his nanny entwined arms down at their sides like a chaste barrier between them. "I have your eyes, my precious lioness. Rest and heal. We have the rest of our lives to fortify together."



... I saw “The rest of our lives,” she repeated, worrying her delicate thumb.  
d.” Herand forth across his as she held tightly to his hand.

... Elias. Her sudden silence as she stared up at the canopy made him turn  
side, prop himself on his elbow, and peer at her closer. “I said close yo  
nectionand rest, my love. Not stare up into the night and fret about the future.’  
y love. “But that is all I have ever done.” She shifted to look at him. “And  
have dragged an honest man into my illegal legacy. I fear you wil  
l pulledwhat you have done as much as I regret bringing you to your ruin.”

“I am not ruined,” he reassured her as he closed her eyes with a  
with atouch, then stroked a fingertip over the curve of her cheeks, acr  
fullness of her lips, and along her jaw line. “Leave tomorrow’s wo  
d thosetomorrow, my precious one. Sleep, my love, while the remnants  
miracleslaudanum help hold the brunt of your pain at bay.”

“I never want to be alone again,” she said in a drowsy whisper  
opening her eyes.

at I be “You never will be, dearest. Never again.” He tickled his touch  
eve mecircles across her forehead, along her cheeks, then back up again acr  
temples. “I am always with you,” he murmured, smiling as her br  
selfishslowed back to the steady rhythm of earlier while she slept.

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mesmerized her into a relaxed state.

htened, “Love...you.”

. As he “And I love you, Celia, with a never-ending fury.”

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“The rest of our lives,” she repeated, worrying her delicate thumb back and forth across his as she held tightly to his hand.

Her sudden silence as she stared up at the canopy made him turn onto his side, prop himself on his elbow, and peer at her closer. “I said close your eyes and rest, my love. Not stare up into the night and fret about the future.”

“But that is all I have ever done.” She shifted to look at him. “And now I have dragged an honest man into my illegal legacy. I fear you will regret what you have done as much as I regret bringing you to your ruin.”

“I am not ruined,” he reassured her as he closed her eyes with a gentle touch, then stroked a fingertip over the curve of her cheeks, across the fullness of her lips, and along her jaw line. “Leave tomorrow’s worries to tomorrow, my precious one. Sleep, my love, while the remnants of the laudanum help hold the brunt of your pain at bay.”

“I never want to be alone again,” she said in a drowsy whisper without opening her eyes.

“You never will be, dearest. Never again.” He tickled his touch in slow circles across her forehead, along her cheeks, then back up again across her temples. “I am always with you,” he murmured, smiling as her breathing slowed back to the steady rhythm of earlier while she slept.

“Elias,” she uttered on an exhale.

“I am here, dear one.” He kept up the methodical stroking of her face that mesmerized her into a relaxed state.

“Love...you.”

“And I love you, Celia, with a never-ending fury.”



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“HAS MADNESS TAKEN over this entire household?” Propped up in 1 among a multitude of pillows, her face flushed with the vibrancy of re good health, Celia scowled at the three of them as though ready judgment on their eternal souls.

Elias glanced over at his brother and Duchess Thea in a silent p help.

With a tug on his black armband of mourning, Monty cut an amus back at him as though reveling in Elias’s dilemma of handling his wife.

Celia’s mother, swathed in yards of black bombazine and crepe, b a high-pitched sigh and flexed her hands in their black lace, fingerless atop the jeweled handle of her cane.

“Celia—” Elias decided on a different tactic to convince his stubbc bride that Monty’s somewhat elaborate plan actually held merit and, had worked brilliantly.

The dowager duchess rapped her cane on the floor for silen marched closer to her daughter.

He readily surrendered the floor to his mother-in-law, silently wish luck and Godspeed. As Celia had gotten stronger, her patienc remaining abed as the doctor ordered had lessened with each passio The devil himself couldn’t get along with his fractious beauty, an dared any brave demon to try.

He also secretly reveled in every minute of it. Her furious tempe meant she was healing, and soon—very soon, he hoped—their marri would serve for something much more enjoyable than sleeping.

“Celia,” the dowager said with another sharp stamp of her can plan is already in motion and has been quite successful thus far. I answer to our dilemma.”

“And has dear old Prinny already gobbled up our entailed lands n

he knows no one holds the title? Has he declared it extinct and asked accounts? What about our businesses? The people who depend upon those things not covered by Charles's will?" Celia fisted her hands against the bedcovers. "That is exactly why we didn't kill off my beloved brother in the first place, remember? So everything we worked for wouldn't end up in the hands of Prinny's favorites!"

"Cecilia Elizabeth! Keep your voice down and mind your tone!" I said. Thea rapped her cane on the floor yet again, then turned and ordered me to turn forward with a snap of her head. "Explain it to her, son-in-law. Details please. It is the business side of her. She only listens to details."

"Facts," Celia said, her eyes flashing. "I understand facts, and as you have seen and heard goes against everything you ingrained in me since Mama."

"The Hasterton estate, the entailments, and personal property of the duke will take some time to settle for two reasons, my love," Elias said.

thanks to the brilliance of you and your mother, the estate is very multilayered. Ample time in probate will prevent any nefarious counsel which might rear their ugly heads." Elias couldn't resist a smugness he

allowed himself. "And second, as the executor of the duke's will, I must insist that the Prerogative Court of Canterbury here in London provide so far, terms are properly settled beyond a shadow of a doubt." He leaned down

and kissed her cheek. "All this will give us time to get the original Hasterton letters patent amended. The announcement of the duke's untimely death in this morning's papers, as is the report of the dreadful attack on your young lady while you, Lady Sophie, and a gentleman whose name Lady Sophie would never divulge strolled around Vauxhall Gardens."

"And I shall see to it that the motion for the amendment is brought before the court next week," Monty said with a gloating hike of his brows that

Elias ducked his head to hide a smile. His brother was enjoying this entire arrangement much.

"You shall soon be the Duchess of Hasterton, my lady love, and so." Elias braced himself. His lioness was still not happy, and was a

challenge. "The enlighten all of them on the error of their ways. He saw it in her eyes.

That is the She stared straight ahead, her delicate nostrils flaring as she pulled a deep breath. With her hands clasped so tightly in her lap that her knuckles turned white, she attempted a smile and failed. "Might I have a private

for the with my husband?" she forced through clenched teeth.  
on us? The dowager and Monty looked to him as if waiting for his last  
itop the before he went to the gallows.  
r in the After a tip of his head to release them, Elias resettled his star  
o in the watched them file out and close the door softly behind them.

"This will never work. None of it!" Celia whipped her covers aside  
Duchess pained grimace, then gingerly rose from the bed.

nd Elias Elias rushed to support her. "You were ordered to stay i  
s, if you remember?"

"I am sick of that blasted bed!" With careful steps, she stayed the  
ret, all I until she reached the chaise longue beside the window. "Lying a  
e birth, making me weaker. I can feel my energy ebbing like the tide going out

There was no point arguing with her, and if she felt strong enough  
ie duke up and about, then more power to her. Elias doubted very much that

"First, MacMaddenly could best her.

ast and "How much did you have to pay the Bow Street Runners a  
lisputes MacMaddenly for their silence?" She winced as she lowered herself  
e rarely couch and leaned back among the pillows.

I shall "They are honorable men who refused to take anything or  
ves the explained the situation." Elias draped a light cover across her, then  
wn and down beside her. "Elkins still loves your mother, and it appea  
asterton MacMaddenly is smitten with her as well. Portney has worked for  
mise is years and is a family man. He knows what happens to women not p  
person provided for. England's laws about such things are reprehensible." He  
refused her feet in his lap and started massaging them, as a rather talented wh

once shown him after a long night of celebrating his cruel father's deat  
it to the "And your brother suggested this farce?" Shifting a pillow to

it made support herself, Celia eyed Elias with such an infuriated look that he li  
rely too She shook a finger at him. "This is not funny, Elias. Have you forgot

reaction when I confessed my story to you? And yet here you acce  
legally brother's escapade with open arms when his plot is a great deal weigh  
bout to the immoral and illegal side of things than mine was." She shook he

"Using Friedrich's body as the duke's?" She gingerly clapped a hand  
ed in a chest. "For heaven's sake, they shall hang us all."

nuckles He ached to gather her in his arms and kiss away her frustrati  
te word didn't dare—not as sore as she still seemed to be. "Monty's plan will

and your mother free. *That* is why I accepted it with open arms.”  
request “And you truly believe Parliament will pass the act amendi  
dukedom?” The way she bit her lip made him ache to find the w  
ice and console her as he brushed her tousled curls back from her face. She  
his hand and clutched it as though fearing he would abandon her. “  
e with at they vote the amendment down? Then what will we do?”

He wished he could ease her worries but realized she had carrie  
n bed, with her all her life. His dear one didn’t know any other way to feel.

very worst, my love, the entailed properties would be lost and the title  
course go extinct. But you know as well as I that with so much transferred  
bout is being accounts, all of us could live quite comfortably—even with  
.” earnings, which are nothing to dismiss, by the way.”

h to be “But what about *my* businesses? *My* investments? Have you any id  
old Dr. many people depend on my help for their livelihoods?” Her lov  
quivered, and she clutched his hand tighter. “Mama and I worked :  
nd Dr. hard to build an empire that not only helped us but helped others like u  
f to the of it to be lost?”

“As I recall, the will has the executor take over their managemen  
ice we knew she wouldn’t like his next suggestion, but it was all he could of  
settled “You could maintain your operations under my name.” Another  
ars old reared its ugly head. “Even after the letters patent is amended, the b  
me for dealings might have to be handled much as we have addressed them  
roperly past. Through my office, and rather than *Charles’s* signature-  
placed Anything you attempt might not be taken seriously because you  
ore had woman.”

h. Celia released his hand and massaged her temples. A bitter huff e  
o better her. “I must be getting soft. All this talk is making my head pound.”  
aughed. “You were supposed to stay in bed, dear one. It has only been a fe  
en yours since your attack.”

pt your “Do not chide. I am not in the mood to bear it and have not an o  
ntier on politeness left within me.” She leaned her head back against the pillo  
r head, closed her eyes. “I want to dress and sit in the gardens, since the s  
l on her finally decided to shine once again.” She cracked open an eye and g  
him, daring him to refuse her.

ons but Fresh air would do his precious one a world of good. Dr. MacMa  
set you could fuss all he wished. The man was not only paid well but had

vacate the guest room with which he had been provided. The old  
ing theexcuses grew lamer with each passing day.

ords to Elias rose and pressed a lingering kiss to Celia's forehead, breat  
caughtthe sweetness of her jasmine scent. "I shall fetch Berta immediately  
What ifshe has you ready, I shall carry you down to the gardens, and when y  
of butterflies, bees, and sunshine, I shall carry you back upstairs. W  
d themhave tea there. A delightful picnic. How does that sound?"

"At the Celia lifted her head, her eyes brighter at the prospect. "What ab  
e wouldMacMaddenly?"

l to the "If necessary, I shall lock the bugger in his room."

out my She laughed, then cringed and caught her chest. "Do not make me

But the pleasure in her tone softened the scolding. "I could probably  
lea howdown the stairs all right."

wer lip "Either I carry you both ways or you do not go to the garden at all  
so verywaited for her to accept his non-negotiable terms.

is. Is all "You have become a great deal more assertive since our vows." Sl  
him with a teasing look he found immensely stirring. "I haven't deci  
nt." Helike such assertiveness or not."

fer her. He leaned in for a slow, thorough kiss. When he drew back, he sr  
thoughtthe high coloring on her cheeks. "I am merely being a good husba  
usinesslove."

1 in the Before he straightened, she caught hold of his shirt and pulled hir  
—mine.another heated kiss, entwining her tongue with his. "I shall be glad w  
1 are acan be good together," she said in a breathless whisper across his lips.

"I as well, my lioness." He cleared his throat and stepped back, str  
escapedto regain control of the yearning that raged just below the surface, an  
waiting to be unleashed. "I shall send in Berta and order our picnic."

ow days Her coy smile inflamed him even more. "Yes, my love."

unce of  
ows and



sun hasCELIA LUXURIATED IN Elias cradling her against his muscular chest  
lared atcarried her into the gardens—to the spot beside the waterfall where  
not only given him her virtue but also finally accepted his capture  
addenlyheart. Several blankets were spread on the ground. Carefully stacked  
l yet to

goat's pillows created a pleasing lounge for two.

She arched a brow at him. "Really? You chose this very spot?"

"What better place, my love?" His attempt at appearing innocent miserably.

"Indeed." She couldn't resist a soft giggle. After he gently deposited her onto their pillowed nest, she smoothed out the folds of her black dress and frowned down at them. "I wonder if this would be considered an indoor activity for those in mourning?"

"It is your private garden," he said. "What others think does not matter."

The servants had also somehow found a short-legged table for service in their midst. It was covered with a fine linen tablecloth embroidered with roses and everything needed for the perfect picnic. A plentiful assortment of delicate finger sandwiches, sweetmeats, cakes, tea, and even a small dish of pale golden brandy waited for them.

"Brandy or tea, my love?" Elias sat closest to the table and cut her off with a stern arch of his brow when she started to argue that she should prefer tea. "Brandy or tea, and which sandwiches and cakes do you prefer?"

"How did you know what I was going to say?" She nodded at the brandy. "And I shall start with tea, please, and perhaps a small slice of the cake."

"I knew what you were going to say because your eyes not only show your soul but also mirror your thoughts and feelings." He handed her the brandy and cake, then served himself. "By the way, your brother's funeral was held yesterday before yesterday. What with the summer heat and his condition and the anxious highwaymen finished with him, it was better that it take place in a private manner—even before the announcement hit the papers."

She took a sip of her tea, then frowned down at the delicate golden brandy. Her appetite suddenly left her. "Poor Friedrich. In a grave marked with another man's name. Do you think he will haunt us?"

"Only our memories and nightmares." He offered her the sandwich as she declined. "What is it, love? You have that look."

"Where were you on the night of my *attack* outside the Pleasure Garden?" she had asked. "Will people not ask about that, since I am now your wife? I do not wish to appear to be a coward."

"I believe Monty covered that by saying you and I had a rather



disagreement that night, and you sent me packing, then off you went to the gardens with Lady Sophie just to spite me.”

It failed. “Did I? How terribly foolish of me. No wonder I was attacked. I found the story mildly irritating. While she didn’t wish him to be emasculated by the scheme, nor did she wish to be portrayed as a mindless ninny, I suppose, my injuries made us realize our undying love and I am sorry I did not act more properly immediately?”

“Something like that.” He leaned in close and gently caressed her hair. “The scheme has worked admirably, my love, and I see no reason why it should not continue. We must play this opportunity with all the grace and tiny intelligence you and your mother commanded for so many years.” The light in his eyes melted her worries away. “We can do this.”

The butler coughed. An exaggerated cough came to them through the hedges. Celia sat up among the pillows and called out, “Gransdon? Is that you?”

“Yes, my lady.” The butler emerged from the leafy maze, his look more sour than usual. “Lady Bournebridge and her daughter, do you know her, would like to offer their condolences.”

Celia turned to Elias. “When did you say the announcement was to be made? Do you have the teapot, papers?”

His suspicious scowl mirrored her concerns. “This very morning, my lady. I said. “Could they not just leave a card?” Elias asked the butler.

“No, my lord.” Gransdon’s displeased pucker deepened. “They are in the drawing room. They vehemently insisted on seeing either yourself or the Grace. Do forgive me, but I felt Her Grace should not be disturbed after such an untimely meeting would be better handled by yourself, my lord.”

“Quite correct, Gransdon. That cackling old hen and her daughter want to be the first to confirm the gossip.” Elias rose.

“Surely, you do not mean to speak to them?” As far as Celia was concerned, the woman and her daughter could be swept out with the dirt.

“It is important that word spread through the *ton*, my love.” He tipped his head in the exit’s direction. “What better way could we ask for? A scandal involving a brother-in-law also happens to be none other than the prime minister himself. We need Lord Liverpool and his cabinet on our side because they influence all legislation. It is also my understanding that Lady Bournebridge is spirited to the speaker of the house as well. Monty brought it to my attention

to the woman has more influential connections than I have hairs on my head. I must tread carefully with them. Lord Bournebridge and the prime minister. Both attended the funeral and offered their condolences. I am still not sure how Monty pulled that one off."

7. "And I dislike this." Celia felt the same uncomfortable sense of sorrow about to go very wrong that always guided her with choosing investments.

Her intuition never led her astray. "There is more than gossip at stake here, feel it." She tried to rise, but a stabbing pain when she tried to push herself up made her cry out and fall back among the pillows.

"Celia!" Elias dove back to her. "Lie still. Grandson, forget the love MacMaddenly immediately."

"Yes, my lord." The butler disappeared.

A harsh stinging set her chest on fire. Renewed throbbing at the part of her wound forced her to sink back into the pillows and obey. "If my lord lectures me, it will be his last," she warned, while curling on one side, Lady and holding her chest. Her bandages still appeared dry, thank heaven, at least the surly Scot couldn't complain she had torn open the wound. It hit the caused it to bleed.

After a few slow, steady breaths, she opened her eyes to Elias kneeling by her side. She patted his arm. "Go flatter Bournebridge and her daughter. I shall behave while you are gone and be still as a statue when you return. I promise."

"I will not leave you like this." He hovered over her like a magnificent beast guarding its young. "The Bournebridges can sit there and gather. As far as I am concerned."

"My protective panther." She cradled his cheek in her hand and smiled. "I am fine. I simply moved too quickly." She had also been rash enough to move as though she had no wound at all. Quite a poor decision on her part. "Since you refuse to leave me, once Dr. MacMaddenly has seen to me."

"I please accompany you to the parlor? You can help me get there. I cannot bear the thought of not hearing your conversation with those two friends and her because I know you'll forget and leave out details I should know."

His scowl failed to give her much hope that he would agree. "You do not trust me."

"No!" She pulled him closer. "I want to be there and hear what that isolation in that damn bedroom of mine has been unbearable." He

ad. Weidea how frustrating it was to be cut off from everything.

minister “Damn bedroom?” he repeated with a grin. “Such language, my lo

ot quite “The situation demands it.” The sound of hurried footsteps warn

she had little time to extricate a promise from her overly protective h

nothing “You can carry me into the parlor and have them visit us there rather t

tments. drawing room. I can rest on the sofa just as easily as I can convalesce

here. I please?”

rself up “If Dr. MacMaddenly allows it—” Elias started before being cut

the man himself.

ch Dr. “If Dr. MacMaddenly allows what?” The gruff Scot glared down a

disapproval. “You were ordered to remain in your bed, Lady Cecilia.”

“I have never done well with orders,” Celia huffed. “You might

deepest learn that about me now. And how do you expect me to strength

“If that recuperate if you weaken me by forced confinement to my bed?”

ne side The doctor astonished her by chuckling. “Ye are a great deal lil

ens. At mother, I see.” His amusement disappeared as quickly as it came. “Can

nd and ye to be honest, about whether or not ye feel the slightest dampness

bandages?”

eling at “Of course you can trust me. What sort of question is that?” S

r out of Elias a warning scowl to be quiet, then gently rested her hand on he

til you “The bandages are not wet. I have not torn the stitches nor restar

bleeding. I simply moved too quickly and did not consider that I wou

nificent to rise in a different manner so as not to stir any more pain.”

er dust, “Help her stand,” Dr. MacMaddenly told Elias.

Determined to prove to both the doctor and her husband she wa

iled. “I able to move about, Celia forced herself to take greater care. With Elia

ough to around her, she faced down the doctor, daring him to defy her. “You

er part. am a little weak, but with care and an appropriate amount of time free

, might bed, I will become stronger.”

cannot The physician shook his head and clapped a hand on Elias’s sh

sthand, “God help ye, man.” He leveled a stern glare on Celia. “I shall grant

freedom, but know this: if ye overdo, ye will be right back where ye st

still do if not worse.” He pointed at her. “Do not overdo, my lady. I shall ch

wound later when we change your bandages, aye?”

ey say. “Yes, Dr. MacMaddenly.”

had no “And I will thank ye not to spit out my name as though it tastes b

scolded, but his demeanor bordered on jovial. "Send for me if ye need me." My lady. I shall be with your mother in her sitting room."

"In her sitting room," Celia repeated, finding the idea impossible to imagine.

"Aye." The doctor puffed out his chest and straightened his spine in bed. "Her Grace has challenged me to a game of chess, and placed a tempting wager on her winning that I cannot refuse."

"And the wager is?" Celia asked even though she wasn't quite certain she wished to know.

Dr. MacMaddenly winked. "That is between your mother and my lady." Then he strode away, quietly whistling a jaunty tune.

Celia turned to Elias, ready to scream because she didn't have the strength to run up to her mother's rooms and put a stop to such nonsense.

"Surely, he does not mean..."

Elias steadied her, then gently pulled her into a hug. "What your mother trusts is none of our affair, my love." He kissed her forehead and smiled at her. "Now, I must see to our influential guests that cannot be ignored. If you refuse to stay here or retire to your rooms, then allow me to help me show the parlor, and I shall have Lady Bournebridge and her daughter brought to your chest, so you might hear every word uttered."

"When my strength fully returns, you shall regret teasing me and need threatened while leaning closer to breathe in his strength and reveal. Perhaps tonight, if they were extremely slow and careful..."

An aching heat flooded through her at the prospect. She allowed herself to wrap his arm around her waist but attempted to appear sternly displeased with him. "We will continue this conversation later."

"I look forward to it, my love. Shall I carry you?"

"No. I wish to try it on my own, thank you."

He walked slowly beside her, holding her steady and letting her lean on his quiet strength. As they neared the parlor, he brought them to a stop and whispered, "Remember—we need Lady Bournebridge's connection—Her support. If she is not pleased—neither her husband nor her brother-in-law will aid us in our cause."

She blew out a pained sigh. "I will try not to pull the old cat's tail."

He eyed her as though doubting her sincerity. "Swear it."

She couldn't help but roll her eyes and blow out another disgruntled sigh.

ed me, "I swear."

Elias slowly shook his head and continued on into the parlor. "F  
sible to the sofa, I think. With a footstool to rest your feet on, and I shall sit  
you."

ctacles. "To keep me properly behaved, I suppose?"

such a He laughed. "I would never attempt such a thing, my love."

smoldering look, he added, "I rather enjoyed it the last tim  
tain shemisbehaved."

Another surge of heat rushed through her. She pressed her hands  
nd me, cheeks and prayed for them to cool as she settled into her seat. The  
would surely wonder at the redness of her face.

ave the With some dismay, she realized she was relieved to be sitting. T  
nsense. weary after such a short walk simply would not do. She needed to be  
in every sense of the word—both for herself and Elias. She made a sile  
motherto build her strength with a great deal more walking. Dr. MacMadde  
d down Elias both could either accept it or not. She would do what she would c  
ored. If As if reading her mind, Elias caught hold of her hands and kisse  
y you to "Patience, Celia. We have the rest of our lives. Give yourself time to  
ught to am here at your side and not going anywhere."

"Swear it," she whispered, allowing herself to sink into his gaze.

e," she "With my life," he answered without hesitation. "And now I shall  
d in it. Grandson to bring in our guests."

"If you must." She dutifully folded her hands in her lap and  
him to wiggling her feet to make sure her somber black dress fell into gracef  
pleased all around her legs. *I must be nice*, she chanted to herself.

The unwanted women fluttered into the room, reminding Celia o  
of startled geese running along with their wings flapping. Both wore  
of the palest yellow with white flowers embroidered on the skirts and  
r drawsleeves. Their white gloves and white bonnets were in stark contras  
o a stopred mottling of their faces. They must have worked themselves into  
ections. state before being told someone would finally see them.

ther-in- "Lady Cecelia—you poor, poor dear," Lady Bournebridge said in  
drawn-out whine that nearly made Celia gag. "Temperance and I co  
' bring ourselves to believe the horrid reports from Lord Bournebridge  
sister's husband, Lord Liverpool. We thought them surely mistake  
ed huff. when we read the grim details in print, we could no longer turn our

aside. Please, please accept our condolences.”

Here on “Yes, please do,” Temperance added in her nasal whine. “Are yo  
beside certain you are recovered enough for callers? We thought to see no or  
than Lord Raines.” Her pinch-faced gaze flitted to Elias then retu  
Celia.

With a “I am still quite weak,” Celia said, which wasn’t a lie, but she  
ie you admitting it. She drew a handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed it  
eyes, drying imaginary tears. “And my poor brother Charles is gone.”

s to her “Terrible loss,” Lady Bournebridge said with a sad shake of her he  
e ladies squirmed in her chair like an overly excited child. “With no know  
whatever shall become of you and your mother?”

o be so Biting the inside of her cheek to halt a sharp retort, Celia reac  
a wife Elias’s hand. “Only time will tell, I fear. The future is almost too a  
ent vow bear. Thankfully, I have my husband to give me strength.”

nly and Both ladies perked like a pair of cats spotting a mouse. “Your *hus*  
do. Lady Bournebridge repeated. “We knew you to be betrothed but w  
d them aware you had already married.”

o heal. I “By special license, I suppose?” Lady Temperance asked, sc  
prickly with envy.

“Yes,” Elias said. “We exchanged vows while she lay there bl  
ring for They fetched me as soon as they brought her home. I feared she woul  
me before we finished our vows.”

waited, Celia squeezed his hand, willing him to proceed with caution. The  
ul folds were lapping up his every word. They would surely need to be burpe  
he finished.

f a pair “You thought her dying and wished to marry her before she lef  
gowns Lady Bournebridge clutched both hands to her ample bosom. She an  
l puffed Temperance exhaled wistful sighs.

t to the “So romantic,” Lady Temperance added, her thin lips quivering :  
quite a eyes gleaming with tears.

“Please do spread the word about my awful attack,” Celia said, tr  
a long, sound weak and fragile. “I would so hate for anyone else to suffer  
uld nothing. It was so terrible, I cannot bear to even think about it, much les  
and my of it.” She didn’t need them to ask questions about the attack, since  
en. But not know what wild embellishments Monty had claimed.

beliefs “Indeed, we will,” Lady Bournebridge promised. She leaned forw.

hands still clasped to her chest. "Your mother—how is she faring?"

"She is with the doctor now," Celia managed to tell them without s  
ie other "Dr. MacMaddenly has been indispensable to us during this terrible tir  
rned to "We should go, Mother," Lady Temperance said quietly. "After  
household is in deep mourning, and Lady Cecilia surely needs her rest.  
loathed "Quite right." Lady Bournebridge hefted herself to her feet and of  
t to hersolemn curtsy when Elias stood and bowed. "If there is anything at all  
do to make this trying time easier," she said, "please do not hesitate  
ad. Sheword, and it shall be done. I will see to it personally."

n heirs, "Do forgive me for not rising." Celia weakly fanned herself. "I am  
weak. And thank you so much for coming by, Lady Bournebridge  
hed forTemperance. Your thoughtfulness has brought us more comfort th  
wful tocould ever know." Celia politely bowed her head at both ladies, while  
the inside of her cheek to keep from choking on the lie.  
band?" Both ladies preened beneath the praise, curtsied again, then toc  
ere notleave.

Elias hurried to the window with his hand held high to signal the r  
oundingtotal silence. After a long moment of peering through a crack in the  
draperies, he let it drop and turned to Celia with a smile. "Your cor  
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of them now. We must ask the maids to air it."

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hands still clasped to her chest. “Your mother—how is she faring?”

“She is with the doctor now,” Celia managed to tell them without smiling. “Dr. MacMaddenly has been indispensable to us during this terrible time.”

“We should go, Mother,” Lady Temperance said quietly. “After all, the household is in deep mourning, and Lady Cecilia surely needs her rest.”

“Quite right.” Lady Bournebridge hefted herself to her feet and offered a solemn curtsy when Elias stood and bowed. “If there is anything at all we can do to make this trying time easier,” she said, “please do not hesitate to send word, and it shall be done. I will see to it personally.”

“Do forgive me for not rising.” Celia weakly fanned herself. “I am still so weak. And thank you so much for coming by, Lady Bournebridge, Lady Temperance. Your thoughtfulness has brought us more comfort than you could ever know.” Celia politely bowed her head at both ladies, while biting the inside of her cheek to keep from choking on the lie.

Both ladies preened beneath the praise, curtsied again, then took their leave.

Elias hurried to the window with his hand held high to signal the need for total silence. After a long moment of peering through a crack in the drawn draperies, he let it drop and turned to Celia with a smile. “Your concerned friends are gone, my love.”

“Concerned friends, my foot.” Celia wrinkled her nose. “The room reeks of them now. We must ask the maids to air it.”

“In the meantime, my dear lady, shall I carry you to your sitting room, or do you wish to return to the garden? You have been up for a while now and even received visitors. Remember what the doctor said about overdoing it?”

“The garden.” She needed the sun and fresh air. But most of all, she needed Elias beside her, assuring her everything would be all right.

“The garden it is.” Elias scooped her up and settled her against his chest. “It will be all right, Celia,” he said quietly as he curled her even closer and looked down into her eyes.

“As long as you are here with me,” she whispered. “Never leave.”

“I never will, my love. I swear it.”





## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CELIA'S SOFT SNORES sent a warm surge of joy and contentment through him. Her head rested in the dip of his shoulder, and her arm lay across his chest. She had thrown the silkiness of her leg across his thighs, and her breasts shifted against him with her every intake of breath. Not a single article of clothing existed between them, and never would whenever they were together if Elias had his way about it. With the greatest of care and mindlessly ecstatic joy, they had, at last, after waiting two weeks for her wound to heal, consummated their vows—three times, in fact.

He stared up into the darkness, thankful he had not lost her—the first time because of his own idiocy and the second time to that murderous assassin, Friedrich. Now their lives could settle into the routine of a happily married couple. An amused huff escaped him. Somehow, he doubted life with her would ever be dull or routine.

His thoughts turned somber, going from blissful thankfulness to worry. Monty's efforts to get the letters patent amended had not gone as smoothly nor as quickly as they had hoped. In fact, envious whispering and opportunistic money-grabbing and jealous glances had become disturbingly regular—even from those in Elias's office. The amendment seemed stalled and kept getting pushed aside for other matters. Frustration made him blow out a heavy sigh.

"You insisted I not fret over the delays, yet you huff and puff like a bellows for a fire." Celia shifted with a deep yawn, then curled tighter against him. "I do not mind so much about the title or entailments anymore. My greatest worry is damage to the businesses." Her voice was raspy with sleepiness. She cleared her throat and blew out a heavy sigh. "So many families depend on us to help them keep their shops going until they can manage their accounts themselves." She lifted her head and gave him a worried frown. "If we cannot secure the dukedom, is there any way to transfer what remains under the name of Hasterton to the Bening account?"

including the businesses?”

“I am afraid not, my love.” Elias wouldn’t lie to her. “With everyt probate, we can move nothing.” He combed his fingers through her silken curls, loving the way they tumbled across his chest. “But all is yet. There is still hope for the amendment to be approved. Everything right now because of Wellington’s victory. Once things settle, I am s will persevere. Lady Bournebridge assured it. Remember?” He gently h Elias, her in for a long, slow kiss that stirred him to consider pursuing a s chest.consummation of their vows. “At least now you and your mother are ndroushe whispered across the suppleness of her mouth. “Everything e titch ofbe...*handled* however it needs to be.”

in bed, “Handled,” she repeated while sliding her hand downward. She superbquick glance at the dwindling candle on the nightstand, then smiled. “to heal,terribly wanton for doing this so many times in one night?”

“Terribly,” he said with a groan as she artfully stroked his memb rst timeslow, teasing pulls that made it difficult to be patient and resist the ter s fiendof rolling her over and sinking back inside her. “But if you think about marriedsaid, “we are making up for lost time. After all, we have been married h Celiaweeks.”

“Indeed,” she said as she straddled him and rubbed her wetness worry.him with every excruciatingly perfect stroke. “Two weeks. Fourtee noothlyOnce a day—or, say, twice—since we are newlyweds.” She guided ngs ofencasing him in her hot slickness. As she slowly rocked her hips, she rbinglyforward, sliding her hands up his chest to nibble on his bottom lip to haveworks out to be twenty-eight times. We have a great deal of catchin ide himdo.”

He filled his hands with her luscious bottom and helped her rock like the“Your mathematics are exemplary.”

against “One can only strive to do one’s best,” she whispered as she gui re. My mouth to her breast while grinding against him harder.

oy with With his mouth full, Elias could only groan in agreement.

o many Celia clutched him to her breasts, pulling him upright as she arch an fullythrew back her head while filling their bedroom with her moans.

him a Patience could just be damned. He gently rolled her, ground in we canthen pounded hard and long.

ounts— She met his every thrust, then shrieked as her shuttering spasms

him to hammer on to his own release with a hearty roar.

hing in Trembling with the need to collapse on top of his precious love  
r dark, forced himself to shift and pull her back into his embrace at his side  
not lost she might be strong enough for their loving, his weight on her would  
is as it too much. He turned her face to his, lifted his head, and kissed her.  
sure we you, my precious lioness. More than you will ever know.”

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t fourth The light from the nearly spent candle sparkled in her eyes, making him  
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lse can “I am glad I irritated you into loving me.” Relaxing back on the  
he rested his cheek against the top of her head and pulled her hand

cast a center of his chest. “Feel that? My heart beats for you, Celia. It always

Are we “I am glad,” she whispered in a sleepy voice. “Now, sleep and  
yourself. We have to go twenty-four more times before we catch up to  
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t it,” he to start over again.”

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him to hammer on to his own release with a hearty roar.

Trembling with the need to collapse on top of his precious love, Elias forced himself to shift and pull her back into his embrace at his side. While she might be strong enough for their loving, his weight on her would be far too much. He turned her face to his, lifted his head, and kissed her. “I love you, my precious lioness. More than you will ever know.”

“I love you, dear husband—even though you irritated me into doing so.” The light from the nearly spent candle sparkled in her eyes, making him catch his breath at the depth of love he saw there.

“I am glad I irritated you into loving me.” Relaxing back on the pillow, he rested his cheek against the top of her head and pulled her hand to the center of his chest. “Feel that? My heart beats for you, Celia. It always will.”

“I am glad,” she whispered in a sleepy voice. “Now, sleep and restore yourself. We have to go twenty-four more times before we catch up to where we should be.”

Elias couldn’t resist a lazy chuckle. “And if we lose count, we shall have to start over again.”

“Indeed.”



## EPILOGUE

*Six months later*  
*Hasterton House*  
*London, England*

“...AND FAILING THE heirs male of his body, all titles, entailments, and shall pass to his eldest daughter and the heirs male of her body.” Monty raised his glass of champagne higher. “Huzzah! The Hasterton duchy is amer-

“Huzzah!” Celia steadied her glass while swiping at happy tears. She insisted on rolling down her cheeks. “I cannot believe it is done.”

“Nor can I, *Duchess Cecilia*,” her mother said. After a sip of champagne she handed her glass to Dr. MacMaddenly. “You see? I promised one sip and one sip is all I took.”

The old Scot rewarded her with a kiss on the cheek. “Well done, MacMaddenly. Well done, indeed.”

Celia’s mother took his arm and hugged him closer. “*Mrs. MacMaddenly* sounds so much better than the old dowager duchess.”

“I agree.” He turned and lifted his glass to Celia and then to Monty. “Congratulations to ye both.” Then he turned and lifted it to Monty. “The man who kept at it with the tenacity of a Scot. Are ye certain ye have Scottish blood in ye?”

“None of which I am aware,” Monty replied, laughing.

“I wish Sophie and Frannie were here to share in the news,” Celia said. She handed her half-empty glass to Elias. “We shall have another celebration when they arrive in two weeks’ time for Christmas.”

“And which news shall we celebrate then?” Elias asked with a smile.

Celia tried to give him a warning nudge but couldn’t help but smile. He was so proud and so excited. “Tell them, my love. I shan’t make you wait any longer.”

“Tell us what?” her mother demanded with a hopeful step toward t

“You are to be a grandmother, Your Grace,” Elias said. “Late spring perhaps early summer, as near as we can calculate.”

“Of course,” Celia added with a wicked grin, “my mathematical exemplary, but if the little one proves to inherit the stubbornness of the—June.”

“And late May if he or she possesses the impatience of his mother,” Elias shot back. He set their champagne aside and pulled Celia into his arms. “But I wouldn’t have you any other way, my duchess” he murmured, then kissed her so soundly, she became breathless. He lifted her head and whispered, “By the way, my love, what number are we on?”

With as innocent a look as she could manage in front of their family, she lifted her head and whispered back, “I fear I have lost count, my lord.”

He swept her up into his arms and started for the stairs. Before exiting the drawing room, he turned back and smiled at Monty, Dr. MacMadder, and the dowager. “Do excuse us. It appears we must start over.”

“Start what over?” Monty asked.

Celia buried her heated face in the crook of Elias’s neck as he announced to his brother with a hearty laugh, then strode forward and took the steps to their bedroom two at a time.

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Elias.  
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## About the Author

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