



New Independence Books

When The Rogue Fell

Diamonds of London

BOOK 5

SANDRA SOOKOO

USA Today Bestselling Author

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Author's Pledge and Promise

You have my promise that I have never used AI technology to produce any part of the books I write and publish, and that I never will. Each and every word is mine. I spend copious hours every day outlining my books and then writing them. I

refuse to use AI technology because then that product isn't writing. That is cheating and asking a computer to do the work for me.

So much of writing is organic, and computers simply can't make a reader feel the things a hero and heroine go through. I absolutely love connecting my characters with my readers, and letting my readers have a fully immersive experience while reading my stories.

Rest assured that I will still write every single word in each one of my books, and you have my guarantee that what you have purchased is the genuine book and not artificially created.

I adore my readers far too much, as well as the craft of writing, to cheat them in any way.

Thank you for your continued support.

Dedication

Elaine Mitrovich. Thank you for being such a fan, a reader, and a supporter of my books! I'm so glad I've been able to entertain you all this time. Keep reading and I'll keep writing.

Blurb

Love can heal all wounds... if the demons of the past stay buried.

The Honorable Hugh Ridgeway is the third son of an earl, but he's made a complete wreck of his life and hasn't cared about his reputation despite having a nearly grown daughter to care for. After never aspiring to be anything other than a wastrel, a case of ennui strikes, but when he meets a woman who refuses to fall for his charm and good looks, he might need to change his approach—on everything. At the very least, perhaps she'll have some advice.

A former Diamond of the First Water, Miss Felicity Hixton has been disappointed by life in seemingly every way, so she's hidden behind a wall of prickles. No more will she offer her heart to a man, for she's done being hurt. Yet when a conversation with Mr. Ridgeway regarding launching his daughter into society becomes what the *beau monde* considers a compromising situation with one of London's most notorious rogues, she is shoved into a complicated coil.

When exasperated parents demand an engagement, the pair has no choice but to spend February days in forced proximity. Finding common ground with her heart locked away behind thorns and a less than a respectable life on Hugh's part seems an impossible task, but if one of them takes the first step toward understanding and chance, new avenues will open. Only then can the obstacles in their path lead to a love neither of them expected...

... and when a rogue falls, it might be the most wonderful antidote to long winter nights.

Chapter One



February 2, 1818

Brooks Club

Mayfair, London

The Honorable Hugh Ridgeway heaved a sigh as he shifted in his comfortable leather chair in his favorite corner of his club.

A new month should represent new beginnings, but he didn't know how. There had been no excitement in his life for far too long, and there was no end in sight.

He took a sip of brandy and then reveled in the slight burn of the alcohol in his throat. "Have you noticed the dismal state of the new crop of young ladies entering society this year?"

"What?" Sir Timothy Dashfield—a baronet of a small property in Surrey and also Hugh's best friend since Eton—looked at him with surprise. "Since when are you in the petticoat line?"

The good thing about having such an old friend was that they knew each other's secrets. Conversely, the bad thing about having such an old friend was they knew each other's secrets and therefore lies were easily detected.

"I might be if given enough motivation."

Dashfield snorted. He shook his head and his artistically arranged dark hair glimmered almost black in the candlelight. The man always dressed in the first stare of fashion where Hugh preferred to take a more relaxed style of dress when he could get away with it. "When have you ever

been motivated to do anything?” After a sip of brandy, he eyed Hugh with suspicion. “More likely you merely need a new mistress. It’s been an age since you’ve had a woman on your arm... or anything else.”

“While this is true, I rather think I need a new lifestyle.” With a frown, he peered into the depths of his crystal glass, but the spirits didn’t provide an answer. “This one has grown stale, and there isn’t much hope for improvement.” The words as well as the admission shocked him. “I don’t want another mistress or tryst or entanglement.” The sad fact was he’d used all those things as an excuse or a way to hide from the reality of life.

Not that he hadn’t conducted a good portion of his adult life as a rogue, for he had. Ever since his youth, he’d chased skirts and took full advantage of flirting or pursuing the demi-monde. Until the day when his world skittered to a halt, which was when he’d met the woman whom he married six weeks later. Perhaps that was the trouble with him. At the age of two and twenty, he’d fallen too hard and too fast, but it couldn’t be helped. He had been ecstatic and content.

That love burned hot and bright, and it put a definite period to the end of his roguish ways for a bit. Ten years, in fact, and over the course of that union, he’d been fortunate enough to have a daughter. But his wife had contracted a wasting disease of the lungs. After two years of struggling, she’d died, leaving him with a ten-year-old girl. Now, his daughter was fifteen, and it seemed the longer time went on, the more her moods deteriorated, which meant she swung from anger to sadness to being worrisomely depressed.

It had become something that he’d needed to escape from, so two years after losing his wife, he’d resumed his former roguish lifestyle, had thrown himself wholeheartedly into that in an effort to forget how good life had been, except, it had only lasted shortly. The memories had come back, the longing had returned as well.

Resulting in a discontent he didn’t know how to banish.

“Interesting.” His friend frowned. “What is it you do want, then? For the past few months, I feel you have separated yourself from society and entertainments to the point that I don’t know you any longer.”

“That is a good assessment. I don’t know myself either.” After knocking back the remainder of his drink, he swallowed then blew out a breath. “I want the security and comfort of having a wife again, perhaps start a second family.”

What the hell was wrong with him? Wasn’t he a rogue? Or conversely, was he disrespecting the memory of his first love? It was too difficult to tell, and he didn’t wish to expend the mental energy on figuring it out.

Dashfield stared. “I want to ask you why, but I have long suspected you are a man who needs to be needed, a man who is happiest when he has a devoted woman by his side.” His expression softened. “Quite frankly, you miss being married. You miss domestication.”

Did he? When he peeked into his empty glass and still didn’t find the answers he sought, Hugh sighed. “Perhaps I do. I am bored with my current life, and Jane has entered some sort of downward spiral I am having trouble pulling her out of.” Slowly, he shook his head. “And I won’t lie. I’ve been lonely ever since my wife died. Truth be told, I’m craving a change.”

“A change?” One of the baronet’s eyebrows rose. “Hasn’t your life already been full of changes?”

“It has, and some not by choice.” If he wasn’t careful, he would become too maudlin to continue this conversation, and they would be dropping by a rout soon. “For far too long, I have done nothing with my life, but now I’d like to leave a legacy, you know? Something to be remembered by besides a man bordering on wastrel tendencies.”

Or an embarrassment to Jane.

His friend snorted. “You have your daughter. That is a fine enough legacy. She won’t always be so recalcitrant and against being part of society.”

Oh, God. It hadn't occurred to him that she would need to be launched in a year or two, neither had he pondered the fact that she might soon be wed. He rubbed a hand along the side of his face then shoved his fingers through his hair. "I need to do something, my friend, for I feel as if I am drifting—perhaps have already done so—too far away from her. Seeing her reminds me so much of Amelia that I sometimes can't bear to look at her..." He shook his head. "Which isn't fair to either of us, but..."

Never had he admitted that to anyone let alone himself.

"But you've come to garner a certain reputation throughout London in recent years, and to do something else would be sure to draw gossip and speculation." His friend downed the remainder of his brandy then laid the glass on a small rose-inlaid table at his elbow. "You forget, though, that I have known you for years. I stood up with you at your nuptial ceremony." He tapped his temple with a forefinger. "The reason for your sudden need for a legacy is the fact that your brother died just over a year ago, and now that you're out of proper mourning, you are bored, and perhaps a smidgeon fearful."

"Damn your eyes." But there was enough affection in the utterance that it caused no offense. "Poor Jeffrey." His middle brother had died in a riding accident. Broke his neck while racing a fellow in Hyde Park—illegally racing that is—and perished instantly. He was a better rogue than Hugh could ever be, but that death had cut him to the quick. It affected him deeply, for they had been quite close. "Amelia didn't like it when I would go about Town with him. Said he was a horrid influence on me."

"And so he was, yet you idolized him at times."

"I thought him quite sophisticated, with freedoms I didn't have since marrying." With a soft sigh, Hugh glanced into the space between his chair and Dashfield's. "Don't misunderstand me, I adored marriage with Amelia, but there were times when I missed bedeviling the ladies with my brother."

“Oh, of that I have no doubts. He often replaced me in your affections, I’ll wager.”

Heat went up the back of Hugh’s neck. “Not that often, old chap.” Snapping his gaze back to his friend, he offered what he hoped was an apologetic grin. “You and I are still here, though, eh?”

“I expect so.” The baronet grinned. “Can’t get rid of me so easily.”

“I should say not.” Then his grin faltered. “Jeffrey and I were going to be partners in business. Open our own counting house.” Though he already worked for one of the largest houses in London, he grew tired with the owner taking such a large salary while the rest of them worked for what was left, and for long hours at that. “We’d planned to make ours a fat lot more comfortable than most, and introduce shorter hours.”

“Jeffrey was reckless; you are not. No doubt you would have done all the work while he reaped the salary.” Dashfield shook his head. “If you still dream of opening your own counting house, I suggest you ask your oldest and best friend in the world to partner with you. That offer has never gone stale.”

Indeed, his brother had been reckless and a risk taker, to the very end. “Ah, Timothy, what would I do without you?” He rubbed his eyes. “We should, indeed, go into business, and let us talk about doing just that before the next quarter, hmm? Find a place?” When his friend nodded, Hugh heaved out a breath. “I often wonder, though, if I will meet with the same fate as Jeffrey. Losing him not long after Amelia died, it has changed me, I’m afraid.”

“Death and mourning do that to a fellow.” His friend’s gaze was intense as he looked at Hugh. “Do you hope to meet an eligible lady soon, perhaps at the Pimperdell’s rout tonight?”

Did he? “If that is what fate demands.” But he frowned. “I suppose such things won’t be easy.” Yet it had been with Amelia. He’d met her by accident at Gunter’s in the

summer that year, when he'd bumped into her at the crowded sweets shop, wherein she'd dropped her flavored ice on her white skirting, and it continued to tumble downward until it came to rest on the toe of his boot. "I fear I'm wildly out of practice with courting."

"Nonsense. It is much like flirting but with intent." Dashfield wagged his eyebrows. "You're charming enough and you were married once. The second time should be old hat."

"It's daunting." Hugh shrugged. He slid a watch from his waistcoat pocket, checked the time, then replaced it. "Though, I fear even my charm is fading."

"Poppycock!" Even though it was empty, his best friend lifted his brandy glass. "Here's to new horizons, new paths, and new beginnings." He winked. "I look forward to seeing what happens next."

"Don't be an arse any more than you can help." But Hugh laughed and lifted his own glass. "Thank you. What of you, my friend? Do you wish to be settled and domesticated as well?"

"Ha!" Amusement danced in the baronet's eyes. "Not just yet. I'll wait and see what occurs with you this second time 'round before I make such a decided leap."

"I am as curious as you."

Dashfield sobered. "Seriously, Hugh, you deserve every good thing, for you have had enough sadness and loss in your life, so please endeavor to keep an open mind, hmm?"

"I will." Yet what did he have to offer a woman? His position in the counting house didn't gain him much in the way of an income. True, he was the third son of an earl, but he didn't want to rely on his father's wealth to fund his life. And lastly, there was Jane and his worry for her. Would she even want another woman to replace her mother? Not that anyone could, of course, but they hadn't sat down to talk about how she fared, what she was feeling five years following her mother's death.

Or even what her hopes for the future were. *Have I failed as a father? Will she grow into a young lady, marry the first man who comes along merely to be done with me?* All of that remained to be seen, but he couldn't lose that piece of Amelia if his daughter chose to turn her back on him. *I must do better.*

“Good. Shall I go to White's and enter a wager or two in their betting book?”

Hugh made a rude gesture at his friend. “I think not, for I expect you to be on my side.” When a feeling of restlessness came over him, he vaulted from his chair. “Shall we remove to the rout? I'd like to peruse the guests before a crush forms.”

“Oh, I'm on your side, of course, but I also have a perverse curiosity.”

“Why?”

The baronet pushed to his feet. “I don't know how you'll manage to cock this up, but you will. As you've said yourself, you have been out of practice for a few years, and I'll wager by the end of this evening, you'll have either received a slap from a proper lady or have someone defend her honor against you.”

“You might not be far from the truth, but let us attempt to have fun anyway.” If he wasn't so damned lonely for companionship or if he wasn't worried about his daughter, none of this would be needed, but here he was.



Pimperdell House

Hanover Square

Mayfair, London

“Well, damn.”

“What?” Dashfield frowned as he glanced at Hugh. “Is there an angry ex-mistress in the mix tonight?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Well, there could be, but I’ll have you know, none of the women I stopped protecting were angry enough to want revenge.” With a gesture of his chin, he directed his friend’s notice across the drawing room. “What the devil are my parents doing here?”

“Perhaps they are friends with Pimperdell and his wife. I mean, the man is quite powerful in the Lords, and your father probably wishes to remain in his good graces.”

“That is entirely possible.” After all, his father was the Earl of Birkenstead, and he was still quite robust for a man of two and sixty.

As he peered at them, pride swelled his chest. Theirs had been an arranged marriage that had grown into a love match. They were a handsome couple, each with gray-streaked brown hair and brown eyes that reflected compassion and understanding.

He might be a man who worked a trade with wastrel tendencies and a daughter who resented him, but his parents had never treated him differently from his oldest brother—the heir. Yes, they always seemed dismayed whenever his life went off the beaten path, but they offered him grace because of Jeffrey’s death as well as Amelia’s passing.

Now it was time for him to repay that kindness.

“God, it’s going to prove dull tonight, isn’t it?” The official social Season would begin in a few months, and right now the “little Season,” was coming to a close, usually around Valentine’s Day or shortly before depending. Traditionally, those connected with the government, the diplomatic corps, the solicitors, literary people, and those of the gentry who had no large estates, remained in Town from November, with an interval of a fortnight at Christmas, until February. Most of the titled and wealthy were scarce during those times, which meant there was little entertainment for men like Hugh.

Then a willowy redhaired beauty entered the room with a shorter woman who possessed light brown hair and a rather plain face. Hugh nudged Timothy in the ribs with an elbow. “Do you know who the redhead is?”

His friend peered in the direction of Hugh’s gaze. “I do not, but I’m willing to find out for the sake of introducing you.” He smirked. “Perhaps not all that dull, hmm?”

“I would appreciate that.” The next woman he would take to wife could not be blonde, for that would remind him too much of Amelia. “In the meanwhile, I am going to seek out the card room, perhaps play a few rounds before the dancing begins for the evening.”

“Deep down, my friend, you are a coward.” Timothy dropped a hand on Hugh’s shoulder. “There is nothing wrong with merely talking with women without an agenda.”

“Please don’t lecture me tonight, Tim.” Moving away, he huffed. “My mind is gripped with confusion. There is far too much that requires thought from me just now.” In fact, if he dwelled upon it for any length of time, he would suffer an emotional breakdown, and Englishmen of the *ton* did not do such things. In fact, when he’d lost Amelia, he suffered with a stiff upper lip, and when Jeffrey had gone off this mortal coil, he’d taken the news hard behind closed doors. Had he shed tears later after each event? Yes, but only in private and he’d never spoken of that weakness to anyone, least of all his daughter.

Shouldn’t he remain strong for her?

“I understand, my friend.” The baronet looked upon him with sadness in his eyes. “Though I want to tell you things will get better, you and I both know that is sometimes not a possibility, so I will say don’t be too hard on yourself and don’t rush things just because you believe they should be on a set timeline.”

“Thank you.” As the tightness in his chest faded somewhat. “I’ll come back in half an hour. If it still proves dull, we’ll go back to the club.”

Then, because he truly was the coward Timothy likened him to, Hugh left the drawing room as if the hounds of hell were after him. Before coming out this evening, before he'd made the decision to find a new wife, he should have discussed the possibilities with his daughter. No doubt Jane had needs she would like to have met, or perhaps her mind was stuck in a morass of confusing emotions like his was, but he'd forgotten and would have to rectify the situation.

Chances were high he wouldn't meet anyone interesting enough to even pay a call to. Yes, the redhaired lady was a vision, but that didn't necessarily mean anything, and honestly, he'd had a slew of attractive mistresses. What he truly wanted was a woman who could be a friend, a companion, as well as a lover.

Perhaps then the hole in his heart would begin to fill in and the void of loneliness and loss would stop trying to suck him into that darkness.

Chapter Two



February 2, 1818

Pimperdell House

Hanover Square

Mayfair, London

Today is my thirtieth birthday.

Miss Felicity Hixton frowned at the crush of people currently occupying the drawing room. Her parents had highly encouraged her to attend this rout, and by that she meant they'd bundled her into their carriage and almost strong-armed her into going to the society event, all because she was too long in the tooth and unmarried.

As if being at this age is scandalous.

Not that it was her fault. Somewhat. Men in general couldn't be trusted anymore. As if they ever could. Truly, modern men only wanted a woman if she could warm his bed or elevate his position in society or fill his coffers. None of which she'd been able to do for her one and only fiancé. And that ended up being the scandal of her Come Out year.

Which had been the last time she'd ever consented to going anywhere within the *ton*.

Until tonight, when her parents stopped bickering with each other for the sake of uniting on the problem of seeing her married, for her mother was the niece of an aged viscount, which gave her a tiny sliver of respectability and connection, and gained her access to places wherein the family wouldn't have been able to go.

All on the hopes that Felicity would somehow—in any way—not prove a disappointment by securing a decent match.

She tamped down on the urge to snort in derision. *Lightning doesn't strike twice.*

Perhaps that was merely one of the reasons why she hadn't wished to participate in anything having to do with the *ton*. Over the years, her parents had drifted apart. Their bickering and arguing had reached constant levels. There was only peace when her father was away on business, or her mother consented to go back to the cottage in the country.

Why would she—Felicity—want a union like that? To forever be at odds with a man one couldn't escape due to the bonds of marriage? No, thank you. She respected herself too much for all of that. Except, some nights when she was the most lonely, she thought it might be nice to have someone to talk with over the breakfast table, or go on walks with while discussing nothing much in particular, or sit in a drawing room and read silently while the other person did the same.

Perhaps I shall get a cat. Or five.

“Felicity, dear, you really should pay attention when someone is talking to you.” Slight admonishment rang in her mother's voice, and when her parent pinched the inside of her arm, her focus slammed to her mother's face then skittered to an older man who stood before them.

“I apologize for woolgathering.” She frowned. “What was it that you said, Mama?”

“Oh, it wasn't me who was talking.” Her mother's eyebrows rose, and she gestured at the man with her head. “This is Lord Holystead. He is quite interested in speaking with you, possibly leading you out tonight once dancing is underway.”

“Ah.” Of course he was. “How do you do, my lord?” Already, his name had popped out of her head.

“Quite well, thank you.” The man was bold enough to look her up and down, which cheapened the thrill she'd acquired when she'd donned the burgundy velvet gown. “If

I'm fortunate, I'll charm my way through to you letting me pay my addresses." He winked and then peered at her mother. "Need a mother for my two young ones. Rambunctious twins, but weren't we all at seven?"

"How lovely!" her mother enthused with a grin that didn't quite meet her eyes. "Twins."

"Runs in the family line," the man said, apparently proud of that fact. "Wouldn't mind a whole passel of brats." In an aside to Felicity, he said, "My wife died in childbirth. Lost the babe as well, but I'm still spry enough to try again."

Oh, dear heavens. The peer was at least twenty years her senior. "Well, I will be sure to speak with you later." Hoping her non-existent acting skills weren't obviously non-existent, Felicity glanced across the drawing room, locked eyes with a handsome man with dark brown hair, she waved. "Now, if you will excuse me? I've just seen a friend and wish to say hello before the evening gets away from us."

"Who could you possibly know?" With a frown, her mother glanced about the area. "You never go anywhere of consequence."

"Stop, Mama. I visit the lending library, the shops, tea houses, Hyde Park." Felicity ticked the items off on her fingers.

"Those places don't matter. You should strive to be a guest of countesses and duchesses." She took Felicity aside and whispered fiercely into her ear. "There is a perfectly lovely man here who has shown an interest in you. Please stay and talk with him."

"I truly can't do that right now, but perhaps after I'm done conversing with my friend." Then, she squeezed her mother's fingers, gave her an encouraging grin, and broke away as fast as she could. But the trouble with that was, since she'd made eye contact with the stranger, his curiosity had been piqued and now *he* was tracking her progress across the room toward the door.

Truly, there would be no chance to flee. It didn't matter that she wasn't the society type or that mingling within the *ton* made her ill-at-ease, fate had already been tempted.

The man caught up with her at the open double doors to the drawing room and thereby thwarted her escape.

"Pardon me, but do we know each other?" He sent his gaze along her form, moving it slowly up and down her person, letting that regard linger on her décolletage for a few seconds before meeting her gaze once more.

"We do not." Heat seeped into her cheeks as she couldn't help but take in the picture that he made.

Perhaps a handful of inches taller than her average height, he was lean in all the right places with slightly broad shoulders. His clothing was well-tailored, which helped show his form to advantage, but it was the shock of dark brown hair that fell over his forehead that fascinated her, and her fingers itched with the want to brush it back.

"I... Uh, I needed an excuse to get away from that horrid Lord Whatever His Name Was." The heat intensified as amusement reflected in his eyes that were as deep and rich as coffee. "I am terrible with names."

The corners of his mouth tilted slightly upward as if he were amused. "Understandable." He glanced past her right shoulder. "Ah, Holystead. Yes, he is rather a desperate sort. Those brats of his could raise the dead with their caterwauling, or so the gossip goes." Slowly, the man grinned, and she could do nothing but stare, for he was handsome in an understated way. "By the by, I'm Mr. Ridgeway, and truth be told, I'm quite bored at these sorts of things."

"Oh!" How interesting. She'd always assumed the people assembled at society events all wished to be there. "I thought I was the only one who had no use for society." When he maintained his grin, a few odd flutters went through her lower belly. "I'm Miss Hixton, and here under protest." Did that sound too ungrateful?

Mr. Ridgeway snorted. "Why is that?"

“My mother is beyond embarrassed to have a daughter who is thirty—just turned today, actually—and who is not married. As if I’m steps away from the grave and will regret I’ve never brought a man up to scratch.” Now that *was* ungrateful.

“Ah, so it’s her sworn duty now to see you safely matched and out of her hair. To anyone.”

“Yes, exactly.” She shook her head, remembered her original task of escaping the rout, and then edged toward the door. “If you will excuse me? I’m going outside.”

“To do what? Stand in the cold until your parents are ready to leave the event?” He shook his head. “You’ll freeze. Dancing hasn’t started, so there is at least two hours yet to endure.”

“Right.” It was something she hadn’t thought about before. Yet knots of worry pulled in her belly and her nerves felt strung too tight. “I don’t enjoy being in public all the same.” Another two steps took her into the corridor beyond, and then completely out of her mother’s line of sight.

With a mixture of curiosity and amusement in his eyes, Mr. Ridgeway followed her. “How much do you know about raising children?”

What an odd question. “Next to nothing, I’m afraid. Why?”

He frowned as he came abreast of her. “I have a fifteen-year-old daughter, and I fear I’m failing in her upbringing.” As he spoke, he moved toward the staircase.

Inexplicably, Felicity followed. A few people and couples milled about in the corridor, but most people were intent on reaching the drawing room. “Why would you say that?”

“She is surly and withdrawn. Sometimes she doesn’t wish to speak with me or she tends to stay in her room.” A shrug lifted his shoulders. “I am at a loss.” Then he plunged down the stairs.

“Where are you going?” Why start a conversation with someone if one intended to remain mobile?

“Moving to a more private location, away from the noise of the drawing room,” he said over his shoulder. “God, I detest these things.”

Honestly, she hadn’t thought about the ambient sound, but now that it had been put in her mind, there was quite a decibel of noise emanating from that room. “Wait!” She followed behind with more care on the stairs due to her skirting. The last thing she needed was to sprawl inelegantly at the bottom of the stairs for a new scandal that would make people remember the old one. “Do you think I can’t offer advice just because I don’t have children?” Why did people always seem to make assumptions? It was another reason she kept herself aloof from society. “I’ve had my fair share of being with children, for I teach young ladies pianoforte and voice, so I suppose I *do* have experience of a sort.”

Mr. Ridgeway didn’t stop until he’d reached what appeared to be a small parlor at the rear of the house on the first floor. “Please, come inside. We’ll talk like civilized people.” He stood back from the door and allowed her to precede him into the dimly lit room. Clearly, the hosts of the evening didn’t expect guests to make use of the space, for only a few candles had been lit around the room; the wall sconces remained dark. “You are a governess, then?”

“Hardly.” Felicity snorted, as if the very idea was repugnant to her. “I’ve been gifted with the ability to read music and play that music on the pianoforte, sometimes on the harp, and the flute if I’m feeling ambitious.” She shrugged as she entered the room and shivered, for there was a decided chill in the air. The fireplace hadn’t been lit. “Once upon a time during my Come Out year, my mother hoped to use that talent to attract a man...” Her words trailed off, for it didn’t matter, and only made her look pathetic.

As if I need help in that regard.

“When I was a boy, my parents thought having me trained on the violin was a fine idea. Being a third son meant

nothing much was expected of me.”

“You didn’t take to music?”

“I did not, and instead, my endeavors sounded more like cats being tortured, which in turn offended my music master, who quit six weeks into the lessons.” Once more, that grin was in place, and if she had been anyone else, she might have melted from the inherent charm that oozed from him. “I much prefer reading prose and poetry. Both in front of an audience or merely for my own entertainment.”

“That is lovely to hear, for many men look down their noses at the ability to read or the fondness therein.” From what he’d said, she thought he was of the *beau monde*, since it wouldn’t matter if a carpenter or a butcher had a third son. Everyone would already know he must make a living. And it was a refreshing change.

“Yes, well, I have always enjoyed the hobby, but I was really given freedom to pursue it with the support of my wife.”

“Oh!” She sucked in a breath. “You are married.” Of course he was. Almost all the halfway attractive men in London were, and those who weren’t only wanted a woman for all the reasons that shouldn’t matter. The dratted war had taken too many men.

“I was. Once.” As he wandered closer to one of the candles, she caught a glimpse of sadness and loss in the depths of his eyes. “A handful of years gone by, but I don’t wish to talk about that right now.” He waved a hand. “Now, about my daughter. How best, do you think, can I reach her, understand her?”

“Well, that depends on many different things. First, I would need to meet her, talk to her, determine what sort of girl she is.” She moved over the floor toward him, and as she did, Felicity admired the shades of green in the Aubusson carpets. “Once I do that, I can advise you on which direction you need to go.”

“What the girl really needs is a companion, someone closer than a governess who can guide her onto the path she

needs to go. Someone she can confide in that could then advise me.” He shoved a hand through his hair. “Such a task would prove impossible, for the girl would merely turn them all away or bury herself in her room.”

Oh, dear, the man smelled divine! Like sandalwood, oranges, and a hint of leather. Putting that discovery from her mind, Felicity frowned. “Have you ever considered she might miss her mother?”

“Uh...”

“Truly, it never occurred to you?” One of her eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Just as you are still sad, so is she most likely.”

“I am not sad.” Immediately, the charming grin fell from his face. “I’m perfectly well, thank you.”

“Ah.” Prickles she understood. It was a lovely and easy defense against... everything. “My mistake.” An awkward silence brewed between them. “Well, I hope you have good fortune with your daughter.” When she took a step backward, something small and brown skittered over the toe of her slipper. “Eek! What was that?”

Mr. Ridgeway glanced downward and grimaced. “Nothing but a mouse.”

“Ack!” With another squeal, she dashed toward him in an effort to put distance between her and the rodent. “I don’t like vermin. Detest them!”

He snorted, and there was a trace of mischief in his eyes. “Then don’t look down. It’s quite near your hem.”

“What?” Felicity squealed. “Where?” No matter where she glanced, there was no sign of the mouse. “You must find it! I will faint dead away if it touches me!”

“It won’t...” His eyes rounded. “Oh, buggar, it’s in the process of running up your gown.”

“Aah!” A screech left her throat. “Get it off!” In her haste to dislodge the mouse, she must have spooked it, for it scampered upward only to dive inside her bodice and nestle

itself between her breasts. Of course it would, for her full bosom had always been the bane of her existence. It was the first thing men noticed about her. “Oh, dear lord, it’s in my bodice.” She gave into a full body shiver then wrapped a hand into Mr. Ridgeway’s lapel. “Help me!”

“What the devil do you wish for me to do? I am not a mouse expert.” He peered at her as if she’d grown a second head.

“Mr. Ridgeway, please!”

“But I—”

“Ooh, ooh, its little feet are on me.” The feeling of the mouse moving about inside her stays between them and her shift had her worst fears being realized. Heat swamped her person, and it was even more vital that she hold onto Mr. Ridgeway as she went a bit lightheaded. “I’m going to faint.”

“Damn and blast,” he muttered beneath his breath, but he snaked an arm about her waist, no doubt to steady her and keep her upright. “Hold still and pardon the trespass.” Briefly, he met her gaze, then dropped it to her chest and he plunged his hand into her bodice.

“Hurry!” Felicity squirmed because the mouse was well and truly stuck inside her stays, but having Mr. Ridgeway’s hand within her bodice was quite an interesting experience.

“I can’t get a grip on it,” he said from around what sounded like clenched teeth as he fumbled about inside her clothing.

“Ugh.” She shivered. “Oh, get the mouse.”

“Stop moving.”

A gasp escaped her when his fingers brushed over one of her nipples. Had that been an accident? Awareness rippled over her skin and her gaze flew to his face, but he was focused on chasing the mouse. There was no way to tell if he’d deliberately caressed her, but when she tried to put distance between them, the fingers at her hip tightened and he reeled her a bit closer.

“Stay still. I almost had my hand about it, but then you moved.” Annoyance threaded through his voice.

“Right.” Her mouth went dry, for at such close proximity she discerned the beginnings of an evening shadow clinging to his cheeks and sharp jaw as well as a glimpse of a few glimmers of gray at his temples. The delicate skin at the corners of his eyes had fine lines, as if he were used to either grinning or laughing on a regular basis.

As a rake, perhaps? Yet he’d mentioned he was a father. Such a mystery.

The mouse chose that moment to respond. She moaned in fear and disgust, for its whiskers kept gliding over her skin. “Oh, dear heavens!” Truly, knowing the rodent was touching her skin was more than she could bear. Any moment she would give into a faint. “Hurry, Mr. Ridgeway!” She clutched at her bodice, which pressed his hand—and the mouse—closer.

“What the devil is happening in here?” The bellow came from the parlor door, which had remained opened, directly followed by a feminine cry of dismay.

“Oh, Felicity, *what* is that man doing to you? What are you *allowing* him to do?” It was difficult to separate the disappointment from the speculation in her mother’s tone.

“Mama! Papa!” Could this evening become any worse? When the mouse tunneled farther down inside her stays, she shivered. “I... uh...” Another moan shuddered from her throat, and she sagged against Mr. Ridgeway’s chest, looking for all the world as if he was fully pleasuring her and she near to coming undone.

“You are violating my daughter, sirrah, and I demand satisfaction.” Her father’s ominous words in his thunderous voice echoed through the room and finally penetrated her fear-laden brain.

“Papa, stop! This isn’t what it seems...”

Chapter Three



Bloody hell!

Hugh wrenched his hand from Miss Hixton's bodice, and even though he'd done nothing wrong—much—heat surged up the back of his neck and into his ears anyway.

“You *demand* satisfaction?” He gawked at the couple standing just inside the parlor, and since Miss Hixton had identified them as her parents, it was all the more damning. “That is quite an antiquated notion, don't you think? Especially when there is nothing scandalous happening here?”

Of course, Miss Hixton chose that time to squirm, which unfortunately had her chest brushing against his side, since his arm was still around her waist.

Immediately, he stepped away from her so there was no more contact, for that innocent action had interest shivering along his shaft.

“Your hand was down my daughter's bodice! What the hell should we think? A man only does that for one reason.” The slightly paunchy man with the thinning black hair glared at him while his wife bounced her gaze between Miss Hixton and him.

“So you say.” Hugh didn't quite trust that calculating look. Just as he opened his mouth to respond, his worst nightmare came true, for *his* parents crowded into the room.

“Is someone in trauma here?” his father asked. “We heard yelling and came to investigate.”

“Father?” He couldn't help but gawk while inwardly wincing. “What are you doing here?” One thing about his father was he cut an impressive figure, especially in evening clothes. As the Earl of Birkenstead, he was the sort of fair-

mindful and compassionate person Hugh had always striven to be.

“Your mother and I were invited.” A frown pulled his lips downward as he glanced from Hugh to Miss Hixton as she squirmed and clutched at her breasts then to her parents. “What has happened? Is everyone well?”

Meanwhile, his mother—tiny in comparison to his robust father—stared in dismay at him with her eyes large and filled with confusion. “Oh, Hugh, what have you done now?”

“That makes it sound like I’m always encouraging scandal.”

She huffed. “Haven’t you these past years?”

Then Mr. Hixton sliced a hand through the air. “Your son has violated my daughter. When my wife and I came in, hoping to speak with our daughter since we saw her follow this chap, his hand was down her bodice, and from the sounds she made, it was quite clear *what* he was doing.”

At his side, Miss Hixton gasped while still trying to evict the mouse. Why wouldn’t the damned rodent just make an appearance? Its presence would clear up the whole of the misunderstanding. But his parents both sported looks of disappointment while her parents wore expressions of determination.

And the noose tightened about his neck.

“Damn it, Hugh, can you have one night where you don’t chase women?” His father rubbed a hand over his face.

“I wasn’t—”

“I demand he do the right thing by my daughter,” Mr. Hixton said as he puffed out his chest. “The honorable thing.”

“Ha!” Hugh snorted. “Why, because she’s on the shelf and I’m an earl’s son, so that’s the best chance she’ll have these days?” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he realized he shouldn’t have said them aloud, for tears sprang to Miss Hixton’s eyes and a furious blush stained her suddenly pale cheeks. “I apologize,” he whispered to her.

“I rather think you don’t,” she bit off. “You knew exactly what you were saying... even if it’s true.” And she once more scrabbled with her bodice, but the disgust and distress in her expression drew his compassion as well as his amusement. If nothing else, Miss Hixton *was* interesting.

“If the rumors surrounding your son are true, he’s a true rogue,” Mr. Hixton continued in a confrontational voice, but at least it was directed at the earl. “No doubt he *did* have ravishment on his mind when he encouraged my daughter in here alone.” One of his eyebrows rose in challenge. “She’s an innocent even if she is long in the tooth. That shouldn’t be taken lightly.”

Well, damn.

Not bedded by the age of thirty? Did that mean she wasn’t wanted? Had never been sought out? Was there something wrong with her, or did the desperation from her parents warn off potential suitors? The mystery surrounding her deepened. Hugh shot a look to the woman at his side. Her face was as red as a beet now, and she’d turned her back to everyone in the room, from the mouse down her gown or out of embarrassment, he couldn’t say.

“And so it should,” his father finally said with a narrowed gaze resting on Hugh. “Perhaps this will finally tame your propensity to bed anything in skirts even though you are a father.” His expression softened as he closed the distance between them. Then he dropped a hand on Hugh’s shoulder as he lowered his voice. “I realize that losing someone you care about is horrific and life-changing, but you must push past that, son. You need a settled life. Perhaps, in time, you will see this was a sound decision and come to rub tolerably along with your new wife, perhaps provide your mother and I with more grandchildren.”

“Since my other two siblings haven’t done that enough?” he said with heavy bitterness dripping from his inquiry. Then he immediately regretted that since his brother was dead.

“No, because children bring happiness, and lord knows both you and Jane need to remember what that feels like.” Sympathy reflected in his eyes. “This is the best thing for you and will put an end to all the gossip and scandal.”

“But I did nothing wrong.” He glanced at Miss Hixton, who still struggled with her bodice as if she were deranged. “Tell my father the truth.” Yet she either didn’t hear him or she didn’t care, for she remained silent.

“Ah, see there?” Mr. Hixton asked with a triumphant grin on his face. “They are both guilty, so an engagement should be offered.” When everyone in the room stared at him, his grin only widened. “The dowry for my daughter will be quite handsome.”

“Of course it will,” Hugh muttered as he shoved a gloved hand through his hair. “How else to ensure your daughter will be wed, right and tidy and without fuss? Quite an incentive, hmm?” Why the hell couldn’t he stop talking? Each word demeaned the woman at his back, and she didn’t deserve that, for she truly had done nothing wrong. At the moment, tempers were too high to talk reasonably. He heaved out a huff of frustration. “I will call on Miss Hixton tomorrow, and then settlements and other things can be discussed at that time.”

At least it would keep the peace until he could think of something else.

His father nodded. “Is that agreeable to you, Hixton?”

“It is.” The man nodded, and his eyes almost gleamed with the boon. He turned to his wife. “No need for the further expense of trotting Felicity out, for now she’ll soon be wed.”

“That makes me feel so much better,” Mrs. Hixton said as they walked from the room. “After her previous disappointment and scandal, this is almost refreshing.”

“As if I’m only good for marriage on the fringes,” Miss Hixton snapped while still wrestling with her damned gown.

How interesting. Hugh met his father’s gaze. “Please leave. I have had my fill with everyone this night.”

“Very well, but I want your promise you’ll do right by Miss Hixton.” His tone brooked no argument. “I want no hint of scandal reaching my name thanks to your latest misdeed.”

Ah, because the title of earl had always meant more than the actual well-being of his children. “At least you’re consistent.” With another huff, Hugh nodded. “You have my word. I’ll call tomorrow on her around midday then I will drop by and inform you and mother the deed is done.”

“Excellent.” His father took his wife’s hand. “Let us seek out our host for the evening. All of this has been unsettling and I require a brandy.”

“Of course, dear, but the end is nearly in sight. We needn’t worry then.” Relief lingered in his mother’s voice. “No more scandals or strange women. A solid home for Jane...”

Which only made Hugh even more aggravated. How the hell was he going to explain that he was expected to offer an engagement to a woman he didn’t know to his daughter? For that matter, how was he supposed to introduce Miss Hixton to Jane?

Bah! Women—people—are nothing but trouble.

When he turned about, shock punched him in the chest to find that his new fiancée had bent at the waist, had her bodice and stays pulled away from her body so that he caught a quick glimpse of lovely rounded flesh through the fine cotton of her shift, but then the brown mouse hopped from her clothing. It landed, confused, on the carpet before it finally ran beneath a chair.

“Dear heavens, thank goodness,” she breathed and then stood fully upright. Her cheeks were red, and a few locks of her hair had escaped their pins. “I detest rodents.”

“So I have surmised.” Though he was angry, he strove to keep those feelings in check, for she didn’t deserve that ire. “I apologize for the words I said earlier. Truly, I didn’t mean them.”

“Stop, Mr. Ridgeway.” Annoyance skated across her face. “It is merely another reason men are unreliable. And because of that, I will be forced into an engagement with a man who is a stranger, a man I don’t know if I will even like.”

“Fair enough.” Yet that particular response was as interesting as everything else she’d said up until now. Why would she mention it? Did they have more in common than he realized? Life had disappointed him—women in particular. His wife had died, leaving him alone with a young child, and his subsequent mistresses hadn’t held his attention. Additionally, for some reason, he wasn’t skilled in having female friends either. “Why the hell did you have to make so much noise?” If she’d remained more composed, none of this would have happened.

“I had a mouse in my bodice!” She stared at him as if he’d grown a second head. “What was I supposed to do?”

The corners of his mouth twitched with the need to smile. There was something about her that amused him. “Truly, that’s a horrid situation. Were you bitten or scratched?” He had to admit, she had a lovely bosom and her skin had been warm and fragrant. Too bad he’d been wearing gloves and she a shift beneath the stays. Regardless, he hadn’t been able to help taking a very small advantage by brushing his fingers over a nipple until it had hardened. The gasp she’d uttered had made him even more curious. How would she react if he kissed her?

What the devil was wrong with him? She wasn’t exactly the type of woman he would choose. Which was true, but now he was expected to offer for her.

“I am well enough.” When she gave into a full body shiver, the faintest whiff of lilacs wafted to his nose. “I detest rodents.”

“So you keep saying.” He shook his head. Miss Hixton didn’t act like most women he’d been acquainted with. “Why, though?” It helped that she was opposed to this match, but he was still curious. “Will you tell me?”

“Fine.” Miss Hixton huffed out a breath of apparent frustration as she worked at setting her clothing to rights. “One summer when I was around ten years old and my brother was thirteen, we ventured out into the countryside that surrounded my father’s cottage.” She perched on the bolster arm of a low sofa. “We were bored and wanted a place to go to escape our parents’ fighting, so we ventured into one of the outbuildings. It hadn’t been used in a while, but the lock was broken, so we went in.”

“And it wasn’t as you’d expected?” He could just guess.

“Good lord no.” As she gave into a shiver, an expression of distaste went across her face. “The whole thing was completely infested by field mice who’d made homes in the old straw that had been stored there.” Briefly, she closed her eyes against the remembrance. “My brother and I were soon overrun by the mice, which had scattered when we entered. The rodents went everywhere, with their beady eyes shining in the lantern light and their little claws allowing them to climb on everything—including us.”

“That does sound ghastly.”

“Sometimes I dream about that day.” She rubbed her gloved hands up and down her bare arms. “Never will I forget what it felt like to have all those mice on me at once. Everywhere, even in my hair.” Shadows filled her eyes when she looked at him. “Biting and running and darting, with their quivering whiskers and long tails.” A gagging sort of sound left her throat. “Every time I see a rodent, it takes me right back to that day.” With one of the pins, she attempted to repair her wrecked updo. “I took to my bed for days afterward.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” As stories went, it was quite endearing, and a bit of the reserve he’d had against her crumbled. “We all have things we are afraid of, even now.”

Surprise jumped into her eyes, and for the first time in noticed they were a bluish-green color in the dim light. Unusual but pretty. “Do you?”

“Of course.”

“Will you tell me?”

Would he? “Not at this time. You should probably go join your parents lest it costs us more than this meeting already has.”

“Right.” She lightly bit her bottom lip, and awareness of her slid over his person as well as shivered through his shaft. “I’m sorry.” Worry went through her expression.

“Think nothing of it.” Hugh shrugged, tried to push that interest to the back of his mind. “It is the way of our world, I’m afraid.”

“Ha. *Your* world, perhaps.”

“True.” Obviously, she wasn’t part of the *ton*, or if she was, it was on the outside. “Be warned. I am hardly the catch your parents might assume. Being the third son of an earl doesn’t mean much these days, especially if that man has already been married, life has rejected him, and that has made him turn to the emptiness of scandal.” Truly, that was as succinct a way to sum up his life than anything else.

How... disappointing.

“Ah.” Miss Hixton rested her gaze on him for long moments. Unfortunately, there was no way to know what she was thinking. “Well, take heart. I’m not a catch either for more reasons than my age.”

Another interesting tidbit that led to nothing. Why was she so afraid of revealing anything personal? Other than the mouse history, that was. And despite himself, he wished to peel back a few of the layers surrounding her. “Did you ever think that some of the best people aren’t perfect?”

She slipped from the sofa arm with a look of puzzlement. “Quite honestly, I hadn’t given it thought. You see, I’m not fond of people as a whole, and try to avoid them when I can.” A self-deprecating laugh issued from her. “If I could leave my parents’ house and their bickering, I would. A nice life of solitude in the country somewhere sounds like heaven.”

“Yet rather dull. Who would you talk to? What of companionship?” Why the devil did he care?

“I can talk to myself, and if I wanted companionship, I could adopt a cat. Some things in life are vastly overrated, Mr. Ridgeway.” A certain haughtiness had entered her tone, which only made her more interesting for the not knowing why.

He caught her hand as she tried to move past him to the door. “Hugh, if you please. That is my name, and since we are to be engaged...”

“Then you mean to go through with it?” Shock reflected in her blue-green eyes while his focus dropped briefly to her mouth. Damn, but those perfectly-shaped lips were made for kissing. *Had* she ever been kissed at her age?

“I’m not certain, but after tonight, don’t you think we are more than mere strangers?”

“Perhaps.” She rested her gaze on him as if trying to figure him out. Then she nodded. “Very well, Hugh. I’m Felicity. Now, if you will excuse me?”

“Of course.” With a bit of reluctance, he released her arm, but the sound of his name in her dulcet tones was rather lovely. “Have a good evening.”

She snorted. “Is that even possible after my future has been through into the muck? After a man has once more caused scandal to become attached to my name?”

Once she exited the room, he stared after her for a long time as he attempted to puzzle out what she’d meant.

Eventually, he rejoined the crowds in the drawing room, and immediately his friend sauntered up to him. “There have been some interesting snatches of gossip circulating just now,” Dashfield said without preamble as he stared hard into Hugh’s face. “Is it true?”

“That depends on what the gossip is.” Honestly, he didn’t know what to think of the events from the evening. It was all amusing and confusing.

“That you were caught in a compromising position with an on-the-shelf innocent and now you’re being forced into an engagement.” The shock in the baronet’s expression mirrored some of what he felt himself. “Is it true?”

As succinctly as he could, Hugh gave his friend an overview of what had transpired in the parlor. “So now, her parents and mine are demanding I offer for the woman. No doubt, both sets see it as a way to get the both of us off their hands for various reasons.”

“Oh, but this is too much!” Dashfield let out a belly laugh. Obviously, he found the whole thing hilarious. “You, married to anyone who isn’t of the *ton* and an aging innocent to boot!”

Hugh narrowed his eyes. “How lovely you are having such fun at my expense.”

“Well, you *are* the one who was talking marriage only a couple of hours ago.” Dashfield sobered and wiped his streaming eyes. “This might be good for both of you, so I wish you luck. There are worse scenarios to find yourself in.”

“Ha!” He harrumphed, but the curiosity regarding Felicity still held. “I wish you’ll be right here in the mud with me soon.”

“Oh, I’ll try to avoid domesticity for as long as possible.” With a clap of a hand to Hugh’s shoulder, he snorted in amusement again. “Let us seek out our host’s spirit collection. No doubt you can use the fortification.”

“I can, indeed.” Though he walked alongside his friend as they quit the crowded drawing room, he frowned. As much as he didn’t like how the engagement was being forced, he wasn’t one hundred percent opposed to such a match, for there had been a longing, a vulnerability in the depths of Felicity’s eyes that had him wondering at her story and her life.

Above all, could she be the key to helping him reconnect with his daughter? Only time would tell.

Chapter Four



February 2, 1818

No. 8, Cranleigh Gardens, Near Chelsea

London, England

Felicity's nerves hummed with pent-up energy.

Never had she contemplated where she and her parents resided before, but since her father was a banker with a high position, she supposed his income was nothing to sneeze at. They'd settled in the Chelsea area when she was in her formative years, for he'd wished to be close to Town and the people therein. Everyone was a potential customer, and her father was always charming to them. The large townhouse kept them in comfort and the address was close enough to Mayfair to remain relevant but far enough away to encourage separation between the *ton* and him being what was called a Cit. It was a poorly kept secret the *beau monde* didn't like to have neighbors who worked for a living, regardless that a merchant's income was oftentimes more than theirs.

Her father maintained he didn't want to live in Mayfair and give the *ton* freedom to gossip. Felicity's mother visited friends there as well as her aged viscount uncle, and the family enjoyed enough of the entertainments used to keep the upper class busy, but they weren't of them. In many ways, there was freedom with that separation, a removal of sorts from the kind of responsibility and duty that held those people captive.

And yet, her father wished to marry her off to one of its members, all over a misunderstanding he refused to hear explained. Worse, because she was now an embarrassment to

the family... and apparently one step away from falling into yet another scandal when they'd barely forgotten the first.

The long-case clock at the end of the corridor outside the drawing room chimed the three o'clock hour. Felicity flinched. Her heartbeat accelerated. At the same time the butler delivered the news that Mr. Ridgeway had come to call. He had also brought his daughter, Jane.

"Oh, good heavens," she whispered. Why would he bring the child? This was hardly a social call. Unless the girl would offer objections to the hasty match. Then it could be interesting.

Her father immediately sprang up from his chair, letting the newspaper he'd been reading flutter to the Oriental carpeting. "Bring him immediately to my study. I don't want him coming up here and trying to convince Felicity he needn't offer for her."

"It's doubtful he would do such a thing, Papa," she said in a low voice, but he paid her no heed. Except, she barely knew the man, so why had she said that?

"Business before tea." Her father exchanged a speaking glance with her mother. "You may go ahead. Perhaps the girl can reveal things about her father. I'd rather not have a madman for a son-in-law if we can help it." Then he followed the butler out of the room.

There was barely time to exchange a look with her mother before the butler returned and announced the presence of Miss Jane Ridgeway.

Slowly, Felicity rose to her feet. The handiwork she'd been picking tumbled unheeded from her lap to the floor as she had her first glimpse of Hugh's daughter. "Welcome, Miss Ridgeway. It's lovely to meet you."

The girl bounced her gaze between Felicity and her mother. A faint frown had taken possession of her lips, but her eyes were definitely Hugh's in both color and shape. Instead of his dark brown hair, hers was a lighter shade with caramel strands glimmering in the sunlight. A dress of delicate pale

blue muslin set off her slender frame, and with her porcelain skin, she made a lovely picture. Her mother must have been quite beautiful.

When she said nothing, Felicity tamped the urge to sigh. Instead, she came forward and slipped an arm about the girl's shoulders. Immediately, Miss Ridgeway stiffened, and Felicity dropped her arm. "You must be chilled. Come and sit close to the fire. Tea should arrive soon." She gestured to her mother. "This is my mother, Mrs. Hixton."

The girl dipped her head. "Good afternoon." Her tone and manner were respectful but wary. "Thank you for allowing me to join you while Papa conducts his business."

Heat went through Felicity's cheeks. Was that how she was seen? As a business transaction or moving property from one man to another? "Come and sit." She gestured to a chair with blue brocade upholstery near the fireplace. "Your father hasn't told me much about you, so I'm anxious to talk with you."

Once she'd dropped into the offered chair, Miss Ridgeway glanced between Felicity and her mother again. "Papa only told me this morning he was coming here to work on engagement contracts and then would formally ask for your hand."

"Oh?" Felicity's heart sank. The last holdout of hope had been dashed. "I wasn't aware he intended to go through with it."

The girl shrugged. "He told me that since he has wanted to marry again, it might as well be to you, for it would save him the boredom of attending society events in the search."

"Ah. Well, he certainly isn't a romantic, is he?" So much sarcasm dripped from the words, she was surprised her mother didn't admonish her. But it wasn't surprising. "Since the engagement is obviously going forward, we should make the best of it."

Her mother clucked with a sound she supposed was triumph. “Don’t act as if this is such a bad thing, Felicity. At last, you’ll have a chance at marriage.”

The heat in her cheeks intensified. She exchanged a look with Miss Ridgeway, and in that one fleeting moment, they understood each other perfectly. “Marriage is not the pinnacle of a woman’s existence, Mama.”

“Neither is trailing about the house with no purpose, and you have nearly perfected that.”

Conversation broke off as a footman brought in a tea tray. Once it was laid on the low table within their grouping of furniture, her mother immediately poured out and handed cups around.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hixton.” At least the girl’s manners were present. “I usually take afternoon tea by myself or with a tutor if they’re visiting.”

“I remember those days,” Felicity said with a smile as she dropped a tiny lump of sugar into her cup.

Miss Ridgeway nodded. “I have tutors on various subjects. There was a music master, but I am horrible with that sort of thing, and when I continually failed at the piano, he gave notice.” A tiny sigh escaped her. “My studies with the tutors will come to an end next year when I’m sixteen.”

“Ah.” After taking a sip of tea, Felicity continued. “Will you go to a finishing school?”

“Papa hasn’t discussed the subject. It’s difficult to pin him down for any sort of conversation.”

“Perhaps he doesn’t know how to interact with you now that you are a young lady.” Felicity’s mother clucked as if she were a contented duck. “My Felicity went to a finishing school. We sent her to one in Bath, but she didn’t make many friends.” She beamed. “Oddly enough, she was a huge success in her Come Out year.”

Surprise crossed Miss Ridgeway’s face. “What happened?”

“Who knows?” Her mother shrugged. “She was far too shy for flirting, yet she managed to land an earl in her second Season.”

Oh, dear God. Please stop talking. Felicity sent a speaking glance to her mother across the low table, but her parent didn't take the hint.

Interest was stamped on Miss Ridgeway's face. “Oh? Did he die?”

“No,” Felicity managed to gasp out through a tight throat. She wished the floor would open up and swallow her. The story was so embarrassing.

Her mother ignored her reaction. “Oh, my daughter was quite popular that year, for she'd finally developed a womanly form.” She waved her teacup at Felicity. “Men seem to respond to a full bosom more than anything else.” After a trill of laughter, she continued. “So many eligible men were interested in her, but an earl made a deal with her father. They were engaged. We were so happy with such a success.”

Perhaps getting away from her parents with a faux engagement would be a good thing. Felicity huffed. “And then we weren't. It's in the past. Perhaps we can leave it there?” If her tone was more snippy than usual, she couldn't help it.

A soft grin curved Miss Ridgeway's lips as she bounced her gaze between them. “But did he die? Is that why you never married, Miss Hixton?”

“Please, call me Felicity.” If her face heated any more, she would catch on fire. “And no.” She swallowed down the urge to retch from embarrassment. Instead, a hiccup sneaked out, which often happened when she suffered from strong emotion of any sort. “It would have been better if he'd died.” *Hiccup!* “Instead, he was apparently appalled at my lack of skill in kissing as well as the fact I was so much younger than he.” *Hiccup, hiccup!* Setting her teacup in its saucer on the table, she said, “He broke it off and fled to India to be away from me and the apparent horrible thing he'd almost done.”

It was better to have it out than to keep referring to it with hints.

Shock moved over Miss Ridgeway's face. "What a cad!"

"Indeed." Felicity's mother nodded. "I think he had skeletons in his closet and was ashamed they might come out with a wedding."

"Ha!" *Hiccup!* "Yet here I sit, rejected, and with the *ton* assuming something is wrong with *me*." *Hiccup!* "It's been nearly ten years. Men stopped calling or sending gifts. No one showed interest. Time marched onward." She pressed her linen napkin to her lips and willed the dratted hiccups to go away. "Eventually, the earl came home. Three years ago, in fact, and he'd married a lovely English woman, the daughter of a high ranking general in India. Apparently, it was a love match."

And she couldn't begrudge him that. If theirs had been the same, he wouldn't have run away. Which begged the question: what was lacking with her?

"After that, my Felicity changed." Her mother sniffed. "She doesn't leave the house—"

"Stop, Mama. I leave the house but only for things that interest me. It doesn't include trying to attract a man."

Her mother ignored her. "And she's shrouded herself with a cloak of thorns. She refuses to go out into society for fear she'll be publicly shunned."

Despite Miss Ridgeway sitting there looking on with rounded eyes, Felicity rolled hers. "Wouldn't you? After the scandal of having a broken engagement, of listening to Papa's rage after it happened and him demanding financial retribution?" She shook her head. "Showing myself in public is terrifying." Her voice wavered. "I'd rather not experience that rejection again."

Why couldn't her mother understand?

"Oh, dear, there is no need to be defensive." Her mother leaned over and patted her hand. "I want you to be happy and cared for when your father and I die." A long-

suffering sigh escaped her. “As it is, we’ll need to take you to the country with us once your father tires of Town. Or, we would have, but now with the engagement to Mr. Ridgeway, some of those worries have diminished.” She flashed a wide grin. “There is also the hope you might grow to love him.”

Annoyance rose in a hot wave through Felicity’s chest. “But not the other way around, hmm?” Why weren’t women valued in society? Why were they not allowed to do what they wanted, to follow a different path? “Mr. Ridgeway will still be a rogue—and yes, I did hear the gossip about him—while I’m once again thrown over and left to pick up the pieces when my life is shattered.” Tears threatened in her voice, but she tamped them down hard, for she didn’t wish to be seen as weak in front of his daughter. “I apologize.” She glanced at Miss Ridgeway. “That wasn’t well done of me.”

Remarkably, the girl snorted. “I also know of my father’s reputation, and I do wish he would change.” Her hand shook, and she set the teacup onto the table. “I haven’t been the motivation for him to do that, but perhaps with the engagement, there might be hope for him.” Her voice wavered. “I have rather missed him over the years, and I wish he would realize that running or hiding won’t change the past.”

For the first time, Felicity saw her as a young child who’d lost her mother at an impressionable age. Perhaps she was only looking for understanding and acceptance as she moved through this new phase of her life. Daring much, she held out a hand to the younger woman. “I won’t lie and say I know what you have gone through or what you are struggling with, but I want you to know, life isn’t quite as bad as we sometimes think.”

“Thank you.” Tears filled the girl’s eyes. “Nothing has been the same since Mama died, and Papa...” Her chin trembled. “He, ah... Well, he tries his best.”

“Then he has a long way to go,” Felicity said and gave her what she hoped was an encouraging grin. “I suppose we’ll muddle through together.”

Miss Ridgeway crossed her arms at her chest. “I don’t need a new mother.”

“Of course you don’t, and I wouldn’t dream of ever trying to replace yours.” *Hiccup!* “In fact, I’d rather not marry your father, truth be told. This happened by accident...” There was no use explaining, for it *was* a bit indelicate.

“Oh, la.” Her mother shook her head. “You make it sound like this is a chore. It matters not that there are no feelings between you and Mr. Ridgeway. Your future will be secure, you will have a family to look after, and soon enough, you can have the honor of helping to launch Miss Ridgeway into society. She’s a taking thing, has the potential to be a diamond like you were—”

“Please stop talking, Mama. This is all too much.” Felicity had the thought of running from the room, but that wouldn’t solve anything and wouldn’t be a good example.

The girl cleared her throat. “I’m Jane. Being referred to Miss Ridgeway makes me feel like I’m with my tutors.”

There was no time to respond, for the sound of boot heels ringing outside the door heralded the arrival of her father and Hugh to the drawing room.

Her father was positively beaming. “I’m happy to say, the contract has been accepted by both of us. Mr. Ridgeway and our Felicity are officially engaged.”

Hugh, however, didn’t share in that pleasure. In fact, he wore a scowl that would frighten away most women, but she was far too familiar with the emotion behind such an expression to let it intimidate her. “Yes, we are engaged.”

“How wonderful!” Her mother rose to her feet and clapped her hands. “Now the planning can begin!”

Dear lord, please make it go away.

“Mama stop. Perhaps we will keep the ceremony private, without fanfare, especially after the way this has all come about.” And she didn’t want many witnesses or to once more be plunged into embarrassment.

“Come, Evelyn.” Her father gestured at her mother. “No doubt the happy pair need a moment alone.” Then he glanced at Jane. “Miss Ridgeway, come along. You can ask us questions regarding Felicity. No doubt you’re curious about her.”

The situation had gone from bad to worse.

“I, uh...” The girl slammed her gaze to Hugh’s. “Might I simply go home?”

His nod was curt. “We shall leave directly. Go ahead and wait in the carriage. I won’t be long.”

“Thank you.” She hopped up from her chair, did the pretty with Felicity’s parents, before slipping from the room.

With nothing else to do, as her parents left, Felicity stood. Knots of worry pulled in her belly. “I’m sorry. My father can be overbearing and unpleasant at times. It’s the banker in him, and he knows how to manipulate contracts...”

“So I have had cause to witness.”

She frowned. “I hope he didn’t demand much from you.”

“Only that I set aside a maintenance portion for you—which I would have done in any event—and secure enough pin money so you can make changes to the townhouse.” A grimace crossed his face. “It hasn’t been re-decorated since my wife was alive, but it will be your domain once we wed.”

“You miss her.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.” He nodded. “But that doesn’t matter now, does it?” A pained expression crossed his face. “Perhaps we should attend to the business at hand.” After delving into his waistcoat pocket—and he was once more dressed with grace and elegance—he drew forth a ring with a slim silver band. Small twin oval stones lay diagonal from each other, one a sapphire and the other an emerald, with a few tiny diamonds glimmering between them. It was a delicate piece that reminded her of the colors in a peacock’s tail. “This is for you. We are now formally engaged.”

“Oh?” Her hand shook as he took the left one in his and slipped the ring onto the third finger. It was a tad loose but otherwise fit. “It’s gorgeous.” It might have been vain, but she held her hand up to catch the light.

“It belonged to my grandmother. Father kept it locked up with the other jewels that belong to his estate, but he said since your eyes were intriguing, I should give this particular ring to you.” He shrugged as his gaze lingered on her hand. “The parure is yours upon our wedding.”

“Then you intend to go through with this?” She couldn’t make her voice louder than a whisper. Jewels aside, the knowledge was still shocking. “This isn’t a false engagement until we can wriggle out of it?”

“I considered that, for neither of us wants the match. However, I slept fitfully last night, and during that time, I’ve had to cause to think.” Nothing but honesty shone in his eyes. “I do wish to be married again. To be honest, the life of a rogue has grown stale, and though I’m fearful of whether I can come out of that, I want to try. For my daughter’s sake.” His voice wavered. “But I will require help with that, and I have no idea how to do it.”

“Then I’m collateral damage in your bid to improve yourself?” Was marrying a man she didn’t know the life she wanted? “I suppose it’s better than being alone, but…” What else was there to say?

“I realize the situation isn’t ideal.”

“No, it’s not.”

“But it wouldn’t hurt you to perhaps trim back the thorns you’ve surrounded yourself with.” Truth reflected in his eyes. “We’ve both known scandal. We are both hiding from ourselves—our pasts—behind various walls. That gives us more in common than many couples, and quite frankly, I’ve grown weary of parental interference constantly telling me what I need to do in order to find happiness again.”

That candor surprised her, and Felicity unbent ever so slightly. “It would be helpful to put distance between my

parents and myself.”

“Since we’re thinking along the same lines, let me propose this idea. For the length of the engagement, you can move into my house, as Jane’s companion.”

“What?” Shock slammed into her. “I don’t need more scandal, Hugh.” Oh, how lovely it was to speak his Christian name aloud.

He shook his head. “Hear me out. It’s *not* as scandalous since we are engaged. And will be completely above board. You’ll have your own room, with Jane’s between yours and mine.”

“What about Jane’s sensibilities and needs? She might not want me there, since I would be your second wife. Eventually.” Which she still couldn’t wrap her head around.

“Jane will be well enough. She rarely complains.” Then he snorted. “Of course, she rarely comes out of her room, so there’s no way of knowing.”

“You two need to talk.”

“Perhaps, whenever I can puzzle out the words to say.” He cleared his throat. “In any event, this will give you the opportunity to remove yourself from your parents. *My* parents will stop haranguing me about my questionable choices, and they live across Mayfair besides.” For the first time since he’d come into the drawing room, he offered a slight grin. “I reside in a modest townhouse in a quiet neighborhood of Grosvenor Square.”

It would be a holiday of sorts. And she’d never done anything remotely exciting as this. Additionally, residing under the same roof as Hugh would help her come to know him better. What did he do for a living? How did he fund his lifestyle? She’d be able to see how he interacted with his daughter.

Who was fairly crying out for help.

“Perhaps it *would* be good for everyone involved.”

“Excellent. I’ll make the arrangements to have your things packed and moved in a few days.” As he spoke, he closed the distance between them. “I’ll need to prepare Jane for the changes.”

“Understandable.” Felicity shook her head. “All of this is overwhelming.”

“Agree.”

“And, to be honest, I can’t decide if I hate you or not for putting me into this mess.” It was far too late to tamp her penchant for plain speaking.

He snorted. “Me? You were the one who made all that noise!”

“How would you react if there was a mouse inside your clothing?”

“I don’t know.” Before she knew what he was about, Hugh had slipped an arm about her waist, drew her to him, and then claimed her lips with his.

Oh, dear lord! He’s kissing me!

What did she do with her hands? How was she supposed to act? The kiss was quite awkward, and she continued to watch him as he remained in place, but when he moved his hand to the small of her back and cupped her cheek with his other one, butterflies awoke in her belly that she thought long dormant. There was something about him she couldn’t ignore, and as unexpected awareness shivered along her nerve endings, Felicity relaxed in his hold.

Ever so slightly, the kiss shifted. He didn’t push or boss. Instead, he merely pressed his lips continually against hers, moved over them as if introducing himself in the basest of ways. All the while, she clung to him, fisted a hand into his superfine jacket, and just when she thought she might try returning the kiss, he lightly licked the corner of her mouth before ending it and setting her at arm’s length. That tiny maneuver made her think he’d given the veriest hint of a promise.

Then hot embarrassment poured over her, for she still didn't know how to kiss a man with any sort of authority or knowledge, and since it was the reason her last fiancé had left, would her inexperience cost her this one too?

To say nothing of the fact that he'd gone ahead with the engagement out of obligation and to further his own ends. He didn't truly want her, was no better than all the other men who'd shunned her since that scandal. What was so wrong with her that she never connected with anyone?

"Ah, well, that was... We should..." The words jumbled together in her mind. She wanted to hide away from everything, but she was interested in his daughter. Perhaps she could help them both, and in the process, they might do the same for her.

"Right." Mild shock reflected in the dark depths of his eyes. "I'll send for you and your things in a few days. Then we shall both embark on this new path and hope to the gods it is better than the one we've already walked."

If it was change she wanted, this was a large one, and oddly enough, she couldn't wait to begin... no matter where it would lead her.

Chapter Five



February 5, 1818

Tulip Place

No. 2 Chapel Street, Grosvenor Square

London

Damn and blast.

Hugh stood at one of the windows in the drawing room with his hands clasped behind his back, and as he stared at rear garden and the light snow that fell therein, he wondered if Felicity would join him for tea.

Where the devil is she?

She and her trunks had been moved into his townhouse around midday, but other than greeting him out of politeness, they hadn't interacted, for she had wanted to be settled more sooner than later. Her room was on the opposite end of the hall from his suite on the third floor with his daughter's room in the middle and an empty guest room across from hers.

Afterward, he'd been told by the butler that she was introducing herself to some of the staff. The fact she'd taken the initiative had his respect rising, but how would she be received? For the moment, she was playing the part of a companion to his daughter even though Felicity was his fiancée. Would it confuse the servants, or would they think her putting on airs since she wasn't of the *ton*?

But that wasn't the crux of his thoughts at the moment. Instead, his mind dwelled on that kiss he'd given her yesterday as a way to seal their engagement. He hadn't meant to do such a thing, but she'd seemed out of sorts and quite annoyed at

being placed in that position, so he'd kissed her. The odd thing was, she hadn't been experienced and hadn't kissed him back, but her lips had been soft and plush, and the way she'd curled her fingers into his jacket had both intrigued and aroused him.

Though he'd suspected she was an innocent—even if her father hadn't announced it when they'd been found in the compromising position days ago—he'd assumed she'd at least been kissed before. Yet her inexperience in that had given him pause. *Had* she never been kissed by her previous fiancé?

With each day that went by, the mystery surrounding her deepened, and oddly enough, he looked forward to breaking past the thorns she kept around herself to knowing the woman beneath. When he'd told Dashfield the other day he wished to marry again, he hadn't been lying. He did want to marry, but knowing his hand had been forced annoyed him.

Would that color his perceptions of the engagement and encourage him to hide behind the vices he'd accumulated over the years?

Only time would tell. No doubt her parents were relieved to have her off their hands. Unmarried and unwanted daughters who were on the shelf and tainted by scandal were often an embarrassment to parents. They were usually shuttled off to various relatives or married off to some hapless man who'd showed a modicum of interest. In Felicity's case, she probably had too much spirit for that nonsense, but her father had been especially keen to see her wed. He'd offered Hugh a surprising dowry. Yes, he was a banker, high up on the board, but it had been almost uncomfortable to receive the offer.

The next day, he'd taken half the dowry and opened an account at the Bank of London in her name, for he wanted her to have her own resources in the event that something happened between them. He owed her at least that.

He shifted his stance, choosing to press his palms against the cool window glass. As much as he hated being forced into the engagement, it might be a good thing for all of them, but if she couldn't get along with Jane, then something else would need to be done.

“Bah!” Tired of rambling around through the labyrinth of his thoughts, Hugh turned. “If she won’t come to me, I’ll track her to earth.” Where had the penchant of talking to himself come from? It was quite a bad habit.

Eventually, he found her in his library on the first floor. Seated on the floor, cross-legged like a Turkish scholar, she was in the midst of a circle of scattered books with one opened in her lap and her pink skirting ruffled about her form with a tantalizing glimpse of a stocking-clad ankle and calf. Matching pink slippers had been discarded nearby.

“There you are.”

She startled. Her head came up and she gasped as her hands tightened on the sides of the book she held. “Hugh. Oh goodness. I was supposed to meet with you for tea, wasn’t I?”

“You were.” Fascinated by the reason for her delay, he came further into the room to stand near her location. “Was it me you didn’t wish to spend time with or did the allure of my library hold more sway?”

“Um, both?” The hint of a blush stained her cheeks. Snapping the book closed, she set it on the floor beside her. “I stopped here on my way upstairs, but then I started browsing the shelves. You have quite an impressive collection.”

The surprise in her expression was amusing. “What genre holds your interest?”

“Oh, I couldn’t say, because I enjoy reading a little bit of everything.” After she glanced at the books she had around her, she shrugged and her expression turned sheepish. “Reading is such a magical experience.”

“I agreed.” He offered her a hand. “If you’re feeling peckish, we can enjoy tea here. We should probably talk in any event.”

All the joy she’d derived from poring over books faded from her face, replaced by annoyance with a frown pulling down the corners of her mouth. Regardless, she slipped her fingers into his palm. When he closed his hand around hers and tugged her into a standing position, warmth rose up his

arm to his elbow. The gemstones in her ring winked in the anemic sunlight streaming in through the windows.

“You wish to speak about the state of the engagement.” It wasn’t a question.

“Among other things.” He led her around the mess of books to a different section of the library then urged her onto a low sofa of butter-soft brown leather. “Let me order tea. No doubt you need refreshment after everything you’ve done today.”

“Thank you.”

“Does your father maintain a library at home?” he asked as he crossed the room to yank on a brocade bell pull.

“He does. The room is larger than this one, but you have many more books. Recently, he has moved a billiards table into his library, and a couple of times a week, he has his banker friends over. They play games and smoke in the room, which is the only place my mother allows such activity.”

“Good heavens. The smoke will damage older works.”

“Oh, I’ve told him that, but it falls on deaf ears, so I’ve smuggled out more than a few of the important books. They were in my room, but now? They reside here with me because they were put in my trunks before I could say no.”

“Feel free to add them to this library. They’ll be well cared for here.”

“You have an affinity for books. I can feel it.”

The fact she enjoyed reading had her rising in his estimation. No, they weren’t that different after all. “Yes, of course. No one should ever be denied knowledge, so I like to preserve what I can.” He shrugged, and when a footman came to the door, he quickly ordered tea. “Jane comes down here, but I suspect she doesn’t read. Most likely she tries to avoid me.”

“I’m sorry. Have you talked to her about anything?” A hint of censure rang in her tone. “Specifically, how she feels or what’s she interested in?”

“No.” His chest tightened as he crossed the room once more. “Talking from the heart is... difficult. It has been since my wife died.” And that was the crux of the problems in his life.

“You can’t neglect your daughter.”

Annoyance surged into his chest. “You know nothing about it.”

“Perhaps not. I only know of my own experiences, and since my father was often absent due to his work, he became more of a stranger than anything else.”

“I am here. She is here.”

Felicity snorted. “Yet you are both hurting and lonely.” She looked at him with expectation, but he remained silent. “Yes, I’m a stranger to both of you, but everyone beneath this roof is hiding from something.”

“Even you?” Why the devil did he wish to delve deeper when that would expose his vulnerabilities?

“Yes.” Emotions clouded her blue-green eyes, but she dropped her lids as she stared demurely at her fingers laced together in her lap, closing him off. “Don’t let things fester. I think that is why so many people fall out of favor with each other, regardless of relationship.” Felicity heaved out a heavy sigh. “This is just one of the things my parents continually argue about.”

“Have they always been at each other’s throats or is it a new issue?” Suddenly needing the friendship and companionship she might potentially offer, he seated himself on the same sofa as she with an empty cushion between them.

“They seemed happy enough when my brother and I were young, but when he joined the military and then my, uh, scandal happened and then my father’s position at the bank changed, attitudes shifted.” A frown took possession of her lips, and he dropped his gaze to her mouth. “I suppose they had more time with each other, but the people they’d been when they married had changed. Interests had changed.”

What would she do if he were to drag her over to his position and kiss her properly? And why the deuce was he so interested in her lips? He cleared his throat. “It happens more than people want to believe. Especially if the foundation of the marriage wasn’t strong to begin with.”

For long moments they sat in silence before she sighed and once more met his gaze. “Was your marriage a love match?”

“God, yes. She was perfect and I fell for her shortly after meeting her.” When pain radiated around his heart, he frowned. “That is not a topic up for discussion presently.”

“Fair enough. We both have things in our past we don’t wish to speak about. There is no harm in keeping that history to ourselves.” But she didn’t introduce another topic, so once more they sat in silence.

When a footman brought in the tea tray, Hugh nearly breathed a sigh of relief. He waited until the servant left before breaking the quiet. “Yet we *are* engaged. We should offer glimpses of our lives to each other. At the very least, it would help in building trust and compassion.”

She snorted. “If you don’t already have compassion, that is problematic.” They reached for the teapot at the same time, and when their hands brushed, another jolt of curious warmth went up his arm to the elbow. Her scowl indicated she wasn’t pleased about that either, so had she felt the same reaction?

“What about trust? Seems to me you don’t have much of that.” He accepted the cup of tea from her but declined any additions. “I drink it black.”

“It’s true. My trust in people—men in particular—isn’t what it probably should be but think of life from a woman’s perspective.” As she watched him from over the rim of her teacup, he kept his own council. A huff of annoyance issued from her. “We have no rights in this world. We are not allowed to do much of anything past what is expected. We must ask men for every little thing, and there is precious little for any of us to do that doesn’t include being a wife, a mother, a hostess.”

A shrug lifted her shoulders, temporarily pulled her bodice tight across those tempting breasts. “It makes for dreary thoughts and depressing years, but if a woman *doesn't* achieve those things, she is seen as a failure.”

He hid a grin behind his cup. “Have you always been this outspoken?”

“It has come to me more frequently the older I grow.” For one of the first times since they'd met, she gave him a genuine smile. The gesture made her eyes sparkle and put life into her cheeks.

“Ah.” Hugh couldn't help but stare, for she was completely transformed. “It suits you, so don't become a retiring miss at this point.”

“There is no danger of that. Since I have been navigating spinsterhood, I have found a certain freedom in not having a man order me about.” A trace of bitterness threaded through her voice. “Until now.”

Who had hurt her in the past? And if it was a man, where was he, for he deserved to have his clock cleaned. “I won't bid you nay in anything you wish to do.”

“Anyone can say pretty words, Hugh. Actions are what confirms the intent.” She took refuge sipping her tea.

For long moments they stared at each other in silence. Finally, he nodded. “Perhaps we should talk about the expectations we have from each other, not only in the engagement but from a relationship.”

Her eyes rounded. “Then you are serious about making a go of this? Of eventually marrying?” Shock reflected in those depths.

“I rather think I am.” He shrugged but wondered at her reticence. “Why shouldn't we wed? It's not as if we hate each other, and we have some semblance of a sense of humor. That should go a long way.”

“I...” A blush stained her cheeks. “I'm not trying to be ungrateful, but perhaps you should know me better before you

commit yourself. After the last time I was engaged, I would rather not go through that embarrassment.”

“Then let us discuss it. What occurred in your past to make you leery of men and of marriage? Let me disabuse you of those notions if I can.” Oddly enough, he wanted to help her, because in doing so, perhaps she could do the same for him.

A huff of frustration escaped her, and she finished her tea in silence. Then, when he thought she would either reply to him or tell him off, tears welled in her eyes. Slowly, the color of her irises changed to a peacock blue.

“Everything is shifting.” Those pools of tears fell to her cheeks, and each crystalline drop tightened his chest. “None of it has anything to do with me. To say nothing of the fact I was never asked what I might want for my future or whether I might wish to choose my own husband.” Then a sob was wrenched from her throat, and the empty teacup fell from her hand to the Aubusson carpeting with a dull thud.

Damn and blast.

Hugh set his teacup onto the saucer that rested on the low table. He might be a rogue, but he wasn't a monster, and he possessed shreds of honor, which demanded he be a gentleman. “Ah, Felicity, it's not that bad.” Long ago, he'd learned how to comfort women due to his wife as well as his sister, who'd fled to the Continent to escape the ghosts that haunted her, while he was stuck living with his. After scooting across the sofa, he easily tugged her into his arms. “Come here.” Then he held her in a loose embrace, hoping the tactile feel of another human being would offer her comfort.

To his surprise and pleasure, she clung to him with one hand at his nape while the other curled into the folds of his cravat. Her tears wet his neck while the faint scent of lilacs wafted into his nose. “For the whole of my life, I have been under the impression that I must be good and proper, make a fine match so my parents would be proud, to become a happy member of *ton* society until my brother came home from

India.” She shook her head, and when a hiccup followed, Hugh chuckled, which had her trying to squirm out of his hold.

“I meant no harm and wasn’t laughing at you, only the words you said, because life often does feel like it’s out of control.” He held her closer, ran a hand up and down her back in soothing motions. “But as for us, we can enjoy a long engagement if you’d like the time to become accustomed to each other. Truth to tell, I’m not certain how the dynamic of us as well as Jane will solidify, and I can’t disappoint my daughter. Not again.”

For the first time he realized how his behavior in grief and accepting loss might have affected her. He’d essentially left her to her own devices, without bothering to ask after her well-being.

“I only wish to discover who I am in this world or perhaps what I can do without being an extension of someone else.” For several minutes, Felicity cried against his neck while he did nothing except hold her.

“Then spend the time in exactly that pursuit. There is nothing stopping you,” he said against the shell of her ear. If he wasn’t careful, the silkiness of her skin and the warmth of her body would distract him too far. “Unlike your parents, I only want to see you happy, but if I can protect you from gossip and rumor by giving you a legitimate engagement, where is the harm?”

“And in the process lend you respectability?” The words were a whisper that propelled her heated breath along his neck.

“There is that, but I’m too much a gentleman to tack that on.” When he chuckled again, this time she joined him, and the unexpected mirth delighted him. “Find yourself, Felicity. Do what you need in order to meet this next portion of your life; I’ll support that, but I think it best we treat the engagement as a real one, and in time, I hope you will trust me enough to tell me your secrets and your shame.”

She pulled back with a hint of a blush in her cheeks. “Do you believe you will do the same for me?”

“Do you want that? No one has ever cared before to ask questions or inquire about my life. They just always assume I like cocking things up or don’t want deeper connections.”

For long seconds, she peered into his eyes, and he hoped to God he had what she searched for. Then she nodded. “I have my reasons for hiding; I suspect you do as well. Even Jane, and perhaps we can all help each other. Perhaps not to mend the holes in our hearts, but to encourage healing.” When another hiccup erupted from her throat, she huffed out a sigh. “Pardon me. It’s quite unladylike but it happens when I’m under high emotion.”

That quiriness delighted him, so he grinned. “In a world that worships a skewed view of perfection, I find that endearing.” At least it was the truth. Besides, she was a pleasing armful and it had been an age since he’d let a woman close, truly close, and not merely for a physical coupling. Their engagement might not be ideal, but it was their life at the moment. They’d need to find a way to work together and find common ground. “What else will I discover about you, I wonder.”

She fiddled with the folds of his cravat as her gaze dropped. “Other than I’m a long-in-the-tooth spinster who has problems trusting people?”

The way the moisture in her eyes magnified those peacock-hued depths, the wet, spiked dark lashes that lay in arcs on her cheeks, the heat of her beneath his fingertips, the floral scent of her all had the power to see him undone. How the devil was that possible?

“Well, since we’re engaged, you’re hardly destined to be a spinster, and as for your age? Whoever said there was no value in life experience? I, myself, am seven and thirty, so I’m no longer a pup in his salad days.” Cupping her cheek, he tilted her head back until their gazes connected once more. “Trust will come, but you have my promise I won’t disappoint you.”

God, he hoped that would prove true.

Then, daring much, he moved his head and claimed her lips with his. Just like the last time, those two satiny soft pillows met his, cradled them, and this time he wanted more. Felicity froze as if frightened, then the hand resting on his chest slowly crept upward to twine about his nape, and by increments, she began to thaw, even went as far as to return his tentative explorations.

Those innocent movements, the light touch of her fingers at his nape that might be urging him closer, the way her eyelids fluttered closed this time spoke to her inexperience but also her curiosity within the kiss, and the urge to teach her grew strong in his chest. Her responses were intriguing, but he sensed she held herself back, preferring to keep hidden behind that wall of ice.

Why?

He desperately wanted to find out. It would take his mind off many things, like thinking about his first wife, the growing tension between him and Jane, and the sudden protectiveness he'd found for Felicity.

But oh, how inviting her lips were! The faint taste of tea came away on his tongue when he ran the tip of it along their seam. Before he could hold her more comfortably in his arms or even inquire into her secrets, she planted her palms against his chest, pushed him away, and surged unsteadily to her feet.

He scrambled into a standing position. "Felicity?"

"I can't... This is too much... You'll think me dull just like he did!" With a mumbled apology, she awkwardly skirted around the table and then she fled the room as if he'd suddenly sprouted horns.

What the devil did that mean?

Not knowing but unwilling to give up on her no matter that she continually attempted to keep space between them, he wandered to the sideboard, took the stopper off a crystal decanter, and poured out a measure of the amber liquid into a matching crystal glass.

You can't hide forever, Felicity.

Neither could he. Perhaps that was a good thing. He and Jane needed a catalyst, and he believed his new fiancée was just that.

Once more, he moved across the room, pulled a book from a shelf, and then settled onto the sofa to read while he sipped his drink.

Chapter Six



February 7, 1818

It had been two days since she'd been kissed by Hugh. Two days since they'd started the process of opening up to each other. Two days since she'd pulled the veil of thorns back around herself to stave off disappointment or embarrassment.

And yet, she couldn't stop thinking about the soft press of his lips on hers, the sandalwood and orange scent of him, the warmth of his arms as he'd held her, and the compassion, that desire which had darkened his coffee-hued eyes.

The same awareness had the habit of sneaking over her each time she was in his company. How was it even possible? She barely knew him, and he wasn't the type of man she would have chosen for herself.

Was he?

Oh, she didn't know any longer! She'd lived at Tulip Place for nearly three days, and in that time, she'd learned enough about life here to think everyone struggled with hiding secrets and keeping demons kept in their closets. Hugh rarely interacted with his daughter. Jane either kept to her room or haunted the library, but as he'd mentioned before, she had no interest in books. Instead, the few times Felicity had spied her, she'd had various charcoals in her hands and was sketching in a notepad or on loose papers. What she drew remained a mystery, for Felicity hadn't wished to pry.

But perhaps she should. Someone needed to start the conversation and try to repair the rift. This was a household where the hurt and loss was palatable.

Once more, memories of that kiss danced into her mind. She touched the fingertips of one hand to her lips. Years ago, when her first fiancé had kissed her, she'd been no less frightened than she was now, but those kisses hadn't threatened to set her blood on fire like what she felt when Hugh did it. There was just something about him that made her want to step out from her hiding spot and embrace whatever life would give her.

Yet the horrible words the earl had hurled at her when he'd left her father's drawing room the day he broke their engagement still clanged about her mind, echoing with finality, driving home the knowledge she was a horrid kisser and far too old to do anything about it.

Why would anyone wish to align themselves romantically with her? Yet, in her secret heart of hearts, she yearned for acceptance, for the possibility of love. Could that be attained with Hugh Ridgeway?

Rely on your commonsense, Felicity. Spots on men never change.

The rebuke was necessary, of course. She pulled a face at herself in the cheval glass as she smoothed her hands down the front of a day dress of navy wool and silk blend. Of course, years ago, she'd thought she'd had love with the earl, but it turned out horribly. So why did Hugh keep on with his attempts at kissing her? Was he masking his disgust? Did she truly not know how to kiss, and he was humoring her while trying to convince her that their engagement should be one of real substance?

When did I become one of those women who secretly wants a man while wishing to discover who I am without one?

With a huff at her reflection, at the fine lines she knew lurked at the corners of her eyes, at her hair that perhaps wasn't as shiny as it could be, at the plain dress she'd chosen to wear that had very little adornment on it with the exception of the ivory lace rimming the modest bodice, she feared she didn't fit in with this sort of life. Hugh was an earl's son; her mother was barely clinging to the fringes of the *ton*. This

wasn't her world, and if she indeed married him, she would be forced into it. Would that mean she'd embarrass them both?

“Oh, enough! What does it matter? I can only be who I am.” With a huff of annoyance, Felicity left her room at the same time her stomach let out an unladylike rumble. Of late, she'd been too distracted to eat much, but that was about to change.

Thankfully, she had a distraction in the form of Hugh's daughter to focus on. Hugh could suggest their engagement was real all he liked, but until she was convinced, it would never feel like that to her. Which made her sound wildly ungrateful.

She frowned at the newel post as she descended the stairs. Was this what cattle felt like? Moving from one owner to the next without being asked their preference?

Honestly, Felicity, stop likening yourself to cattle. It's not attractive.

Perhaps not, but women and cattle had about the same rights and consideration in this world, and if she were being honest with herself, the cattle probably garnered more respect. Well, she was here to put a halt to that, at least for her own life.

Hopefully.

When she reached the morning room on the second floor, confusion and apprehension played her spine, for she couldn't decide how she felt about her fiancé. He'd been consistently absent from the house. Because of her? So far, his actions didn't align with his words, but that wasn't surprising. Men couldn't be trusted.

“Good morning, Miss Hixton.”

The sound of Jane's greeting made her smile, for she'd been the one constant in this new, confusing life. “Good morning, Jane. How did you sleep?” The fact the girl didn't use her Christian name didn't bother her. That would take time.

“Well enough.” She avoided looking at Felicity.

“Are you certain?” Her night had been spent reading well into the wee hours of the morning, but when she’d finally extinguished her candle, she thought she heard soft weeping in the room next to hers.

“Yes.” The word was followed by a frown and the aversion of the girl’s eyes to her plate of half-eaten food.

“Ah.” Why would she lie? When Felicity sat across the round table from Jane, she nodded at the footman in attendance, who immediately filled a cup of tea and brought it over. Then her gaze landed on a pretty bouquet of hothouse tulips resting in the very center of the polished wood. Pink, purple, yellow, and white blooms made up the bouquet and the colors contrasted nicely with the greenery included. The vase itself was reminiscent of a Grecian urn. “Lovely flowers. Mrs. Pellam certainly has a knack for brightening rooms.” She would need to thank the housekeeper later.

“Actually, they are for you, Miss Hixton. They were delivered twenty minutes past.” The girl glanced at her with curiosity in her eyes. “There’s a tiny card nestled within.”

“Oh?” Flutters went through her belly. As the footman made up a breakfast plate for her, Felicity stood in order to reach the arrangement. Seconds later, she plucked a white card embossed with gold the size of a calling card from the flowers.

Felicity,

*I thought you might enjoy something to brighten
the dreary February day, for I am trying to
show you my actions speak louder than words.*

Hugh

“Oh!” Heat went into her cheeks. She sat down hard in her chair. “How unexpected.” During her Come Out year ten years before, she often received flowers or boxes of chocolates

or other little gifts from hopeful men, and while the receipt of such had been thrilling to her young lady's heart, none of it had meant anything until the earl had come along.

After the debacle with him, this felt... different. Despite herself, a kernel of hope bloomed inside her heart, but she was far too wary to make too much of it.

Jane snorted and pointed her gaze briefly to the ceiling. "Are they from Papa?"

"Yes." There was no harm in confirming, but she tucked the card next to the plate the footman brought over to her. "I appreciate him making an effort."

"Why? Are you not already engaged?"

"Yes, but that doesn't mean the courtship has concluded." Not that they were courting. "I'd like to think a man would try to win the heart of his lady throughout the life of a relationship."

How long would theirs last?

"That makes sense." Jane pushed the tines of her fork through the remainder of her scrambled eggs. "It must be thrilling when a man gives you flowers."

"It is, depending on the man, of course, but unless they're earnest and honest, it means absolutely nothing." She spread marmalade onto a triangle of toast. "I'm surprised your father procured these." Worry pulled at knots in her belly. It meant he was intent on making the engagement a real one.

"Papa has been lonely, I think, for a long time. If he asked you to marry him, then he must care for you." She frowned. "And he's forgotten Mama," she added in a choked whisper. "I have not."

"And neither should you. She was a large part of your life—your mother. Always keep her in your memories." After Felicity swallowed a bit of toast, she regarded the girl again. "I rather doubt your father has forgotten her, but if he *is* truly lonely, don't you think it's natural he should do something about it?"

“Perhaps, but why can’t I help him with that loneliness?” The girl planted an elbow on the table then plopped her chin on her hand. “I suffer from it too.”

Oh, dear. “There are different sorts of loneliness. If your father wishes to have a woman in his life, wishes to marry again, he should.” When Jane opened her mouth to protest, Felicity held up a hand. “However, I fully am adamant that you and he should talk.”

She nodded. “I feel as if he abandoned me after Mama died. He left me when I needed him the most.” A wash of tears welled in her brown eyes. “I fear he doesn’t love me anymore.”

Damn you, Hugh. Why can you not see your daughter needs you?

The matter required delicate handling, and it was readily obvious Felicity was wildly out of her element. She wasn’t a parent, had no advice to give since she had no nieces or nephews, but she *was* in this girl’s life. There had to be a reason.

“I’m quite certain your father loves you very much, and because of that, he probably doesn’t know how to interact with you now that the woman you both adored is gone.” If that were so, Felicity faced an uphill battle in encouraging either of them into the light. “The only way through that is to talk.”

“He knows where to find me.” Jane slouched in her chair in an unladylike fashion with a frown. “It’s been five years, Miss Hixton. I am still quite cross with him.”

“That is understandable. Please be patient with him.” Not knowing much about his history or his marriage, Felicity was at a loss. “Do you want me to speak with him about it?” Not that she would have much sway over him.

“You would do that for me?” Her back straightened. Hope lay stamped on her young face. “Why?”

Felicity shrugged. “Because I wished someone had done that for me in my youth when my little brother died, and then my grandmother shortly after that.” Quickly, she took a

sip of tea. “Losing those we love is difficult. Makes us think differently. They leave a large hole in our hearts and lives, but never for one second should you forget them.”

“I sometimes draw her face from my mind, but even that is starting to fade.”

“It’s a wonderful idea. I admire that talent, for I am miserable at it. I can only play piano and sing.”

“Then don’t speak with my new music master. He will tell you I’m hopeless at that.” Surprise flitted over Jane’s face. “Would you want to see some of my drawings later?”

“Of course.”

When the longcase clock in the drawing room struck the ten o’clock hour, she groaned. “I need to go. Geography lessons start now.”

“Very well. Perhaps we can talk again this afternoon.”

“I would like that. At tea? Before that I have a French lesson.” A slight blush stained the girl’s cheeks. “My French tutor is quite handsome and so worldly. I adore it when he’s here.”

Oh, dear. “While I take no issue in you appreciating a man’s looks, I really must ask you leave it at that. Since I am acting as your companion.” Not that she had any authority to do such, and they both knew it.

Jane blew out a breath. “Unfortunately, Monsieur René doesn’t know I’m alive or notices me as a woman.”

Obviously, the girl hadn’t heard a word she said. “I’m sure he does see you since he’s giving you lessons.”

“Hmph.” Then the girl sent over a look that proclaimed Felicity no better than the village dunce who couldn’t possibly understand the turmoil of a young lady’s first crush.

With a calmness in her composure she didn’t feel, Felicity ate another few bites of her breakfast then dabbed at the corners of her mouth with her linen napkin. “Ah, you mean he isn’t *romantically* interested in you.” This was going to be

tricky, but the girl needed a guiding hand and not necessarily a friend.

“Yes.” A dreamy expression came over her face. “He makes my heart race whenever he comes near. Should I flirt with him?”

With her looks, that would inevitably lead to disaster. “I think you should keep your mind on your studies. Knowledge is the most valuable thing a woman can have and will serve you well in the future.”

“Of course you would say that. You had a failed engagement before Papa came along and took pity on you.”

They both gasped from the audacity of the comment.

Felicity ignored the heat in her cheeks. “Well, there is some truth in every round of gossip, after all.”

“Forgive me, Miss Hixton. I didn’t mean those words.” Jane’s face had turned an alarming shade of crimson. “In recent days, I have taken refuge behind sharp responses or vast silences. It is not becoming, and my mother would be mortified. She used to scold me about my mercurial moods.”

At least she was self-aware enough to apologize. “Think nothing of it. I did indeed have a failed engagement. As for your father, I rather think he agreed to an engagement out of obligation or possibly resignation instead of pity.”

“I’m sure he did not. I have only known you three days, but I’m finding you clever and funny.” Then she pouted. Mercurial moods indeed. “Studying and focusing on education is dull.”

Felicity offered a small smile. “So is having to depend on a man for every little thing, when they will betray your affections or leave you for someone better or for a whole new continent.” She shook her head. “How about this for a compromise? If you keep abreast of your studies without fail or argument the remainder of the week, I will try to convince your father to let you attend part of your grandparent’s annual Valentine’s Day ball.”

It had been sheer accident she'd discovered anything about that ball, but last night when she'd ordered a late-night pot of warmed milk to help her sleep, the housekeeper had been quite chatty. She'd mentioned the ball citing the fact Mr. Ridgeway always attended and usually had some fast but beautiful woman on his arm.

"Truly?" So much excitement danced in her eyes that Felicity smiled again.

"Yes. I always mean what I say." She cut off a piece of hamsteak and then speared it with her fork. "A young lady's life should be memorable and wonderful. Almost magical, even. I want that for you. Besides, it will help when you attend finishing school." Most definitely the chit needed to go away merely for the experience, but she didn't need to fully conform to those ideals and have the personality corrected out of her.

Jane pulled a face. "Finishing school sounds even more dull."

"Oh, to be sure, it is. However, it will give you a chance to get away from London without your father. You'll learn skills, but more importantly, you'll learn about yourself."

"Did you?"

"To a point, but I have found there is more to learn, for a person changes during various stages of life. We cannot always be angry at the world or hide from it." Gently, she laid the fork on her plate. "I'm looking forward to puzzling out who I am now. Even though there are still mistakes to be made."

"Fair enough." For long moments, Jane contemplated her plate. Then she sighed and raised her gaze to Felicity's once more. "Will you attend the ball? I have been too young to come even though Grandmama says I can stay over and watch the dancing from the billiard room doorway if I'm quiet."

"Uh, I'm not certain." That would mean taking a giant step forward and plunging herself into a society that would stare and gossip and remember why her name sounded familiar.

“You’re engaged to Papa, so you should. It might be wildly entertaining.”

“Perhaps.” Felicity sighed. “Even if I do, I’m afraid I have nothing so grand in my wardrobe that would fit the occasion.” Though she’d attended balls in the past, it hadn’t been for a few years, and she’d declined her mother’s advice in having any made recently. What would she have need for them while trailing about the house?

“Then we should go shopping!” A grin lit Jane’s face and completely transformed her from the surly creature she’d been to an almost ethereal being. “I adore seeing how gowns fall on different women. Such lines and movement! And when a woman wears the right cut and color, it’s a true miracle of nature.”

Now that *was* interesting. “You are a designer?”

“No. I do sketches only, and dream.” The girl shrugged, and joy vanished from her expression and eyes. A blush stained her cheeks. “My grandmother tells me members of the *beau monde* do not dirty their hands in a trade, and some of the girls my age make jest of my scribbling as they call it, say I’m little better than a modiste.”

“Oh, I detest bullies.” Felicity huffed. “All of that is nonsense, and I’ll have you know, good modistes are respected in society. They make a tidy income for themselves.” She tossed her napkin onto her plate. “If drawing sketches of clothes and hats make you happy, you should pursue it—after finishing school.” When the girl frowned, she said, “You’ll never regret learning manners and diplomacy. There is no better revenge on bullies than debating rings around them.”

“Or guiding them into wearing truly ugly gowns that clash with their complexion,” Jane added with a giggle.

“You are a clever girl.” Felicity winked. “You have a bright future ahead of you.”

“Thank you.” Oddly enough, a wash of tears welled in the girl’s eyes, but she blinked away the emotion. “You’re an interesting sort, Miss Hixton. I like you because you’re not

like other ladies who preach being proper and doing things I have no interest in.”

“Ah.” That caught her off guard. “Thank you. I rather like you as well.” They shared a laugh. Then Felicity stood. “Now come. We have much to accomplish before your French lesson.”

“Such as?” Confusion gathered in Jane’s eyes as she rose to her feet.

“We are going in search of a portrait of your mother. To help you fix her in your memories as well as your drawings.” May God strike her dead for interfering in something Hugh might wish to keep buried, but the grieving shouldn’t forget their loved ones. Remembering helped with the healing.

Chapter Seven



February 9, 1818

Hugh yawned then rubbed his eyes as the words on the page of the book he'd been reading went blurry. After a stretch, he yanked off his cravat, threw it at the foot of the sofa where he'd settled. His jacket soon followed, as did his waistcoat. What was the point of remaining properly dressed when the hour was late and there was no one around to see him anyway?

The clothes fell into untidy heaps at the opposite end of the sofa. Once he'd divested himself of his cuffs and collar, he flung them to the floor. Only then did he relax against a decorative cushion with his book securely in his lap.

He'd retreated into the library an hour ago, but he'd had so many meetings with various businessmen in Town regarding a lending house he and Dashfield wished to open that he'd hardly had a moment to himself. Since he'd always been good at numbers and organization, and Dashfield was generally charming when talking to people of every different walk of life, plus he had a head for business, this would benefit them both.

And it was honest work.

However, that meant being away from home for long hours or odd hours. It seemed a lifetime since he'd seen Jane or even Felicity, but he'd heard from the butler the two of them were forging an interesting friendship... when his daughter wasn't confining herself to her room or enduring lessons with tutors.

And, truth be told, he was a coward in his own right, for by having Felicity—his fiancée—installed at his home and in close proximity, it made him remember how happy and content he'd been with his first wife, and though he might wish to have that again, making the engagement real, spending time kissing her, talking with her, would undoubtedly lead to marriage. It felt like a betrayal to Amelia. After five years, shouldn't he be beyond such feelings?

But how did a man simply forget his previous life in order to chase a new one?

“Bah!” He blew out a breath, turned a page of his book, and attempted to concentrate, but it was an impossible endeavor.

Those thoughts brought confusion with them as they had earlier in the day, so he kept himself away from everything, but that only led to more thoughts, and then the loneliness loomed like a specter, waiting for him to fail.

“Hugh? Am I interrupting?”

He startled at the sound of his name in Felicity's voice, yet a queer little thrill twisted up his spine. “Felicity.” His pulse accelerated. “Uh, no, I'm just reading.” When he scrambled to his feet, the book tumbled from his lap to fall with a dull thud onto the carpeting. As she came into the room with the darkened corridor at her back, he sucked in a breath, for she was in a state of undress that was quite delicious and far too scandalous.

“How lovely. I did the same last night about this time. I adore reading as I've said.” Clad in a delicate cotton robe of pale lavender, with each step it revealed a white cotton night rail beneath, embroidered at the hem with purple flowers. Her bare feet made an appearance every so often as her skirting swirled about her. When she passed a candle on a small table, the thin layers went nearly transparent, and oh so briefly showed the outline of her form beneath, and his imagination ran away with him for a moment. “There is something about sneaking through the dark and ending in a library that is both comforting and exciting.”

I can think of at least three other things that are comforting and exciting, and they all involve nestling onto that sofa while being pressed skin to skin.

What the hell was wrong with him?

Suspecting he might desire her more than was proper, but aware she waited on an answer, Hugh quickly swallowed. “Uh, indeed,” he managed to force out from a suddenly tight throat. Awareness shot through his shaft. Another reason he’d avoided being in Felicity’s company was the attraction that crackled between them. If he were to kiss her a third time, would he try and for more? Would she even be of a mind? Suddenly, he wanted to discover the answer, teach her how to kiss, initiate her into the world of carnal pleasures.

Oh, God.

Best shove those thoughts to the back of his mind lest they become too much of a temptation. He cleared his throat. “What is your favorite genre?”

“That largely depends on what I’m in the mood for. Fiction is lovely, romance is divine on occasion if one can realize real life is nothing like what happens on the pages, history is especially thrilling, and I enjoy the odd journal or two. Recently, however, I have been thirsting after tales of adventure.”

“How very progressive of you, and in that vein, I’ll wager you enjoy the words of female authors like Mary Wollstonecraft since you are a like-minded advocate.” He winked, for the slightly teasing words brought out a blush to her cheeks. “There is nothing wrong with that, I might add.”

Her chuckle was light and airy, but a tad forced. “Yes, well, don’t tell my mother. She’d lecture me for hours, tell me it’s not proper.” Then she briefly pointed her gaze to the ceiling. “If she had her way, I’d spend my time embroidering or painting. Both of which I fail miserably at.”

“Oh, I find that difficult to believe.” Dear God, the hard point of her nipples showed through the thin fabric of her clothing. Aroused or cold? Did it matter?

“I’m certainly not accomplished in those things, and I used to be ashamed of that... until I decided my self-worth doesn’t come valued by what I can or can’t do.”

Truly, she was a gem. “That is something I hope Jane can learn from you.”

“Thank you. I hope I at least manage to impart something that shows her how the *ton* sees her is not truly how life is.” A sigh escaped her. “What do you enjoy reading?”

“Like you, my interests are varied and are led by mood. Lately, I’m gravitating to poetry, though.”

“How interesting.” A half smile tipped up one side of her mouth. “When I learned to read, it gave me a certain amount of freedom. I could go anywhere I wished, escape the things in my life that were less than ideal.”

“Agreed.” Peeling back each of her layers was much like investigating an onion. “Now, perhaps you’ll answer this question. Why are *you* up so late? I thought you would have been abed dreaming of castles in the air by now.” Or perhaps wondering what his touch might feel like?

As if to punctuate the point, the longcase clock in the corridor upstairs chimed the midnight hour.

She moved a few steps toward his location, and the candlelight winked off her engagement ring. “I, uh, needed to talk with you about a certain subject and hadn’t had the chance lately since you have been doing your best to ignore me.”

“What makes you think I’ve been ignoring you? I have had business that takes much of my time, which once completed, will be good for the future—our future.” He hoped.

“For one, you are hiding in the library.” A finely arched eyebrow rose in challenge. “Second, every time Jane goes in search of you, you are either not in residence, or you claim busyness.”

How did he explain that he didn’t know what to say to his only child, the girl who resembled his wife so much it physically hurt him to see her, to know that she was his only

link to the past? Obviously, he hadn't figured it out, so he'd ignored it... hid from it.

“Both of those are true statements, but I...” It didn't matter what excuse he gave. Slight panic rose in his chest in a heated wave, for he was convinced he was destroying his relationship with his daughter. As well as Felicity, who was still a bit wary of him, yet he didn't quite trust himself if he were too close. Instead, he strode to a short sideboard and quickly poured out a measure of brandy into a crystal glass. “What is so urgent you needed to seek me out at this unorthodox time and in that mode of dress?” Perhaps liquid courage would help.

A slight blush stained her cheeks. “As if you are not also here at this late hour?” But there was no mistaking the curiosity or interest in her eyes as she slowly guided her gaze over his form.

Damn if his shaft didn't twitch. “In my defense, I would have no doubt fallen asleep here if I hadn't been interrupted. The staff has already retired, since I don't like them up at all hours merely because I'm often restless.” Dangerous territory approached. He hoped like hell he had enough willpower to ignore... everything.

“You are a good man, which leads me back into the reason I'm here.” Again, she passed in front of a candle, and the outline of the curve of her hip nearly had him choking on the swallow of brandy he'd just taken. “I have thought thoroughly over how to ask this favor.”

“Oh?” The word was pulled from a tight throat. Quickly, he tipped back the remainder of the drink and swallowed it in one gulp that burned the hell out of his throat. Dear God, surely she didn't intend to ask for physical intimacy.

Did she?

“As you no doubt know, your parents throw an annual Valentine's Day ball, which you neglected to tell me about. I found out from the housekeeper.”

“Ah.” Relief shuddered down his spine, but it didn’t completely relieve the need building inside him. “And?” Needing something to do with his hands, he poured out another measure of brandy, then wondering what would happen, he decanted madeira wine into a stemmed glass for Felicity. When he brought the goblet over to her, their fingers brushed during the hand off. Heat leaped up his arm. “Continue, please.”

Her eyes rounded. Did that mean she’d felt the connection as well? “Your daughter is of an age now that she’s becoming cognizant of the men who occupy her world.” After a sigh, she pressed her full lips together, which only served to drop his attention to her mouth. “Specifically, her French tutor.”

“I’ll sack him,” Hugh vowed, and followed the promise up by taking a deep draught of his brandy.

“No.” Felicity held up her free hand. “He is everything proper and decorous around Jane. Nothing untoward occurs, but *she* is the one waxing poetic over the man, which might prove problematic later.” She took a sip of the wine. “Oh, this is quite lovely. Smooth and almost nutty.”

Absurdly pleased, he grinned while his chest swelled slightly. “I nicked it from my father’s house. He always has the best imported liquors, but his generosity doesn’t extend to allowing me the same.”

“Neither should he. You are a grown man. Stock your own cellars.” Once she’d taken another sip, she smiled at him, and the gesture transformed her face into that of an angel’s in the flickering candlelight. “Regardless, I proposed the possibility to your daughter of attending the ball as a way to ease her into society gently.”

“What?” Shock roiled through his person. “She’s far too young.”

“Actually, she is fifteen, and from what she tells me will have her sixteenth birthday in a few months. That makes her a young lady who is of marriagable age in some cultures.”

Damn and blast. Not wanting to hear that, he drowned the contents of his glass, swallowed the large gulp, and then sputtered. With his eyes watering, he shook his head. “Over my dead body will she marry at this age.”

“Calm yourself.” Felicity uttered a huff of frustration. “I am not proposing that, of course. Quite frankly, I don’t advocate marriage to any woman—young or otherwise—until she discovers who she is in life and what she wants therein, for men are naught but trouble.” The emotion in those words took him aback, but also intrigued him. Beyond that, he adored her penchant for plain speaking. After a rather large sip of the wine, she continued. “I only thought she could attend the ball—or part of it—with me. Perhaps you could introduce her to a few young men her age as a courtesy, and if one of your friends who has a lofty place in society might wish to lead her out in a reel—not a waltz—that would help her chances once she attends finishing school.”

Hugh stared with his jaw partially agape. “Is this something she wishes?”

“I believe so.” With a nod, Felicity took another sip. “It will be good for her, encourage her out of her room and to mingle with people not only her own age but also in the *ton* that she might come into contact with once she makes her Come Out.”

“You have managed to discover more about my daughter in a few days than I suspected in a lifetime with her.” How was that possible?

“So would you if you’d bothered to talk with her,” she said without embarrassment or hesitation. It was quite... refreshing. After another sip of her wine, Felicity shrugged. “Speaking from experience, a young lady’s Come Out is quite wonderful but also quite frightening, for often the parents place so many expectations on said young lady.” She eyed him with speculation and aggravation. “Promise me you will not impress upon her that she needs to make an advantageous marriage or even a marriage at all. There is plenty of time for that once she enjoys society for a few Seasons before she submits herself to having her identity erased by marriage.”

With surprise, his eyebrows elevated. “Is that what you think? That a woman ceases to exist once she says her vows?” This was the perfect time to delve into why his fiancée was so bitter about such.

“Perhaps.” She shrugged then finished her wine. Once she’d set the empty stemware on a nearby ivory-inlaid table, she drifted toward one of the shelves. “But it’s obvious, isn’t it? No matter what a woman wishes to do in her life, the moment she marries, everything she has belongs to her husband. She becomes a wife, a mother, a hostess, a patron of charities if she marries into the *beau monde*. What is left for her to have for herself? Especially when she is left behind if that man changes his mind about her or desires someone else?”

Ah, poor thing. “Let me try to set your mind at ease. Once you and I marry, you will have free reign to do whatever you wish, become anything you want. I won’t dissuade you.”

She snorted. “You can’t guarantee that, for you are an earl’s son. You have a certain lifestyle to maintain.”

“What lifestyle? I don’t accept much funding from my father because I prefer to stand on my own—”

“And he has no doubt tired of you acting the rogue,” she interrupted with a sparkle in her eye and rosy cheeks. Was she teasing him or had the wine affected her?

He shot her what felt like a cheeky grin. “That is true as well.” Needing to be closer to her, he followed her to the bookshelf. “The payments on this townhouse are made by me, and I’m close to opening my own counting house with my best friend.”

“Oh? I didn’t know you were good with numbers.” She turned about to face him with her back at the shelf. “I wonder if Jane shares that affinity. She already adores sketching as well as fashion.”

Another wave of shock rolled through him. “Truly?”

“Yes.” Felicity nodded. “I have yet to see her work, but when she talks about both subjects, there is such joy in her

face I have encouraged her to keep on, even though her grandmother apparently isn't pleased at the fact Jane might wish to design clothing for clients."

"I didn't know that either, but yes, my mother is quite adamant that members of the *beau monde* not dirty their hands with working a trade. She will have some choice words to say once my counting house opens." He shrugged. "Once a few investors come aboard, Dashfield and I will be able to help people whom the banks might overlook."

"Somehow, I feel there is a story behind this." There, in the shadows, away from the nearest candle, she resembled a ghost. "Tell me?"

How could she even know? "Of course." After setting his empty glass on the shelf near her head, he sighed. "I am a third son who will never hold a title or have estates that will turn a profit, but since my reputation has been questionable since my wife died, the Bank of London has hesitated in giving me a loan for a space to rent for the counting house. It is the only time I have borrowed money from my father, but I *will* pay back every farthing." He'd not told anyone that before. "To say nothing of having friends and acquaintances who no one believes in that truly have good ideas. They deserve a chance. That is where I will come in."

"As I said, you are a good man. There are things in your life you can work on, but then, I have growth myself to chase." She reached up with a hand as if she wanted to touch his face. Seconds later, she let her hand drop as if she'd thought the better of it. "I think we can help each other."

"I would enjoy that." Perhaps it was the brandy he'd consumed, or perhaps it was the unspoken invitation in her eyes or the elusive scent of lilacs in the air, or perhaps it was a natural progression of their relationship, but he planted a hand on the shelf near her head and leaned closer to her, essentially trapping her between his body and the furniture. "Tell me what it is you desperately wished to become before the scandal in your past made you hate men." For there had to be something, and it was time for them both to start talking over and above the shallow. "Unless you wish to tell me about that scandal?"

Shadows went through her eyes. “I suppose there is no point in keeping that a secret any longer, even if it is embarrassing for me.”

“It is in your past, though, and you are here now, under my protection,” he said in a soft voice as he cupped her cheek with his free hand. “The past is not where your path is leading.” Did he believe that? And if he did, could she show him how to move into his future?

“I...” Her lips pursed, and it took all his willpower not to kiss her, but he wanted to hear her story. “My last fiancé broke off our relationship because...”

“Yes?”

Her gaze lowered to the open placket of his shirt. “He couldn’t remain with me due to my inexperience in kissing,” she admitted in a whispered voice. “After that, he fled to India to outrun the scandal, but when he returned, suddenly he had married someone else and declared it a love match.”

“I am so sorry.” No wonder she didn’t trust men. “That is horrible unto itself, but chances were high he’d either been forced into the engagement by his parents or he’d secretly been writing to the woman who is now his wife.” Hugh ran the pad of his thumb along her trembling lower lip. “And if none of that is true, can you begrudge the man love? Regardless of how it happened, love is a powerful force and something we all chase.”

“A love at the expense of my reputation while nothing happened to him?” Incredulity lay stamped across her face. “That is why I despise society. The standards are not fair.”

“I agree, and again, I am sorry. It was a horrid thing to have done to you, but truth be told, each time I’ve kissed you, I have felt you holding yourself back.” He held her gaze, leaned even closer into her. “It is merely a matter of finding a man you like kissing. Nothing more.” To that end, did she with him?

“I hope you are correct.” Once more she lifted a hand, and this time rested it on his chest.

The heat of her seeped through the lawn of the shirt to sear his skin. “Why?”

“I rather suspect I could be quite proficient in kissing you because it is *very* enjoyable, and I will need more practice even if I’m not certain that making this engagement real in every sense of the meaning will be good for my future.”

Though his mind was reeling with everything she’d revealed about herself, he bit back the urge to crow with the small victory. “Well, that is more than we had two days ago. To that end, perhaps we should do more experimentation until you are comfortable.” Then he slipped his hand to her nape, dragged her to him, and lowered his mouth to hers.

Chapter Eight



The sensation of falling assailed Felicity the second Hugh's lips connected with hers. The insistent feel of his hand at her nape, the solid hardness of his body against hers, the heat of him beneath her fingertips that rested on his chest, and the faint taste of brandy on his mouth all worked to send her senses reeling.

When she pulled away, she searched out his eyes in the dim light. Dear God, he was potent and looked incredibly mouth-watering in his state of dishabille. Never had she wanted a man more than she did him right now. Perhaps he was right. The embarrassments from the past didn't matter, not when being with Hugh in any capacity made her feel so different than when she'd been with the earl.

Oddly enough, regardless of how frightening the prospect of marriage was, she was curious to learn how it would feel if a man was consumed with passion for her, and in this moment, it felt as if her blood would ignite with confusing desire for him.

"Hugh, I need—" Frankly, she had no idea, for a new world was opening around her each time his lips were on hers.

"I know exactly what you need, for I feel the same," he interrupted in a low, growly voice that loosed butterflies in her belly. Without additional words, he kissed her, and as he did so, he pulled her even closer to his body until there wasn't a millimeter of space between them. It wasn't the gentle exploratory almost chaste kisses from the two times before. Oh, no. This meeting of mouths was frantic and frenzied, fueled by want, desire, and the delirious knowledge they were the only two people awake at this time of night.

And she was completely alone with her fiancé.

“Mmm!” The words she tried to murmur against his lips never materialized, because there was such glory in that embrace. With a barely uttered moan, Felicity twined her arms about his shoulders. Such a solid form, and such strength he imparted as his arms came around her. He was real and warm against her body, and as he urged her slightly backward until she was nestled between him and the bookshelf, she furrowed her fingers through the hair at his nape, gave herself into his care.

Slowly, one of his hands glided downward, following her spine to the curve of her arse. As he squeezed a cheek, hauled her tighter into his body, she moaned and kissed him harder, as much as she dared, and to her shock and delight, the art of kissing, or the lack thereof, flew right out of her mind. That didn't matter either, for sharing that act with Hugh became as natural to her as breathing.

It was something that would require further thought, but not now. Not when she layered herself against him, held him tighter as if he would suddenly vanish as she reveled in the sandalwood scent of him and the warmth of his lips on hers.

Eventually, he pulled away, and they were both breathless. For long moments, he stared at her, questions in his expression. “Never let anyone say that you have no skill in kissing, Felicity. I'm about to go out of my mind with desire.”

“Oh!” Her chest heaved as her cheeks heated. A queer little throb began between her thighs. Longing circled through her, for this man had shown her that she wasn't the unfortunate, unwanted creature she'd assumed since that broken engagement. “What a lovely thing to hear about oneself,” she whispered as the fingers of one hand curled into the fine lawn of his shirt. As if in slow motion, she tumbled down, down, down into the darkness, and somehow, she knew he would be at the bottom to catch her.

Why? There were no answers, but the longer she held his gaze, the more certain she became.

“Felicity?” Questions clouded his eyes and warred with the same stark need she felt. “Do you wish to go forward?”

In this moment, she wanted to know what it felt like to be consumed by passion, to have a man desire her beyond all reason for herself, to revel in the understanding that he couldn’t live without claiming her for another second. And they *were* engaged, after all, so there was no crime in it or scandal.

This was extending the ultimate trust to him. Did she dare? Frantic heartbeats went by before she nodded, and in the event he didn’t understand, she said, “Yes.” The one-word answer was a breathless affair, and she feared if he didn’t act quickly, she might change her mind out of fear.

What if *he* did?

“Ah, Lissie. What a tempting creature you’ve become.” Hugh crashed his mouth against hers with such force that she very nearly swooned. To be the recipient of such ardor was quite intoxicating. “Come.” To her surprise, he picked her up in his arms as if he were some sort of hero in a story book. “Perhaps I’ll finally come to understand you better.” The rumble of his voice tickled her insides and brought a rush of heated longing with it. Without another word, he walked across the room to swing the door closed with a booted foot. Then, he turned about and didn’t stop his forward momentum until he’d set her on her feet in the middle of the room near the sofa where she’d first seen him.

“Tell me what I should do... teach me.” The murmured order sounded overly loud in the silence. For far too long she’d hidden herself away, only put herself into society under protest, avoided male company, but now, here with Hugh, she wanted to know everything. What was more, he made her feel as if she were worth something. Felicity clung to him, loath to be parted. She lifted on her toes and kissed him for all she was worth—and she prayed she did it well enough—put every ounce of feeling into it so he wouldn’t misunderstand her.

“I’ll do my best, but rest assured, I won’t hurt you, nor will I abandon you like your previous fiancé,” he whispered

back and then returned her kiss with such enthusiasm she almost melted into a puddle at his feet.

“Somehow, I know you won’t.” He was so different than any man she’d ever known. “Will you truly give up your roguish lifestyle? Jane has told me over the last years, you’ve been with more than a few women.” It wasn’t well done of her to bring up such a subject now, but she couldn’t help it. One betrayal was enough.

“You poor thing.” Once more he caught her to him and pulled her flush against his body. There was no question of his arousal, for his hardened member pressed insistently into her hip. Leisurely, as if he had all the time in the world, Hugh removed the pins from her hair. As they fell to the carpet, he raked his fingers through the tresses, tangling them, and just as slowly tipped her head back until their gazes connected. “I won’t lie and say what my daughter said wasn’t true. No, I haven’t been a monk since my wife died.”

“I didn’t expect you to be...”

His voice dropped to a thrilling whisper that sent gooseflesh skittering over her skin. “But I haven’t had a woman in my bed for upwards of half a year. There has been no excitement or challenge to it... until I met you.” He brushed his lips over hers in a teasing taste of what he offered. “Though our engagement was forced, right now, in this moment, I am choosing you *for* you, not to relieve an urge.” Again, he kissed her. “If you want to beg off, I’ll understand.” There was such sincerity in his eyes that she couldn’t help but smile.

“That is quite an endorsement.” She moved into the protective circle of his arms and held on to him as if he’d disappear. “I haven’t said this to anyone, but I’ll wager the sentiment is warranted here. I want you.”

There was a certain freedom in uttering those words aloud.

“Heady stuff.” He responded with a tender kiss that stole her breath as much as the frantic ones did. “I won’t let it be said I’ve ever disappointed a lady.” Then he walked her

backward until the sofa stopped her movement. Teetering, she squealed, clutched at his shoulders as they tumbled onto the soft leather of that piece of furniture.

Felicity's mind whirled with the implications of what they were about to do. Would he think her wildly inexperienced in this, tell her their engagement was off? What if this tryst left her with a baby in her belly after he'd left her in scandal? The reality of her situation was precarious at best.

Drat all the men in the world!

"You are thinking far too much, Lissie."

The shortened version of her name had pleasure twisting down her spine. "I can't help it." The weight of him pressing her into the leather of the sofa scattered those thoughts and sent flutters through her lower belly. She couldn't think straight when he nuzzled the crook of her shoulder, could barely remember her name when he drew a hand along her side leaving heated shivers in his wake.

"Thinking will lead to nerves and that will diminish the wonder associated with the act," he whispered.

"I'll try to keep my concerns at bay." She would worry about any complications when and if they arose and would do so gladly in exchange for this one moment.

"All will be well. You'll see."

"Somehow, you are going to make me trust you merely by being charming, aren't you?" Felicity stared up at him, found his dark gaze in the dim light of the flickering candles, with her hands on his shoulder, the heat of him seeping into her. He waited, watching her, holding her in the cage of his arms while he balanced his weight, a knee between her thighs. Daring much, she nipped his chin. "Such an adventure."

"You have no idea." His grin smacked of wicked promises, and oh how she wanted each one. Hugh once more nuzzled the spot on her neck then moved on to lick her collarbones. "Once I claim you, you will remain mine. I made you a promise when I put that ring on your finger. Everything else can be smoothed out later."

How sweet were those words! They made her believe in almost anything despite her pessimistic nature, but at the end of the day, they were only lip service. Men lied. She twined a hand about his neck, her fingers delving into the hair at his nape, which she rather liked longer than fashion demanded. “Oddly enough, that is quite comforting, even if I’m still slightly frightened.”

Of everything.

“I will do everything in my power to help you through every obstacle.” His brown eyes darkened. “Somehow, you bring me new hope.” He nibbled a path beneath her jaw. The rasp of his stubble over her skin produced an avalanche of shivers down her spine. “You deserve every good thing in this life, Felicity. Don’t let the skewed views of the *ton* make you think less of yourself.”

Tears prickled the backs of her eyelids as she stared up into his face; had he always had that tiny, slanted scar over his left eyebrow? A silly little flutter went through her heart, and it provoked a gasp from her. How was it this man, a near stranger, could make her feel so confident, so feminine? Not knowing, she kissed him, explored every inch of his sensuous lips that were so different than hers, and hoped to God she was doing the gesture justice instead of making a fool of herself. This man was lean and strong, hard in places where she was soft, powerful where she was weak, and his kisses were all too drugging. Of course, the glass of madeira might have lowered her inhibitions, but she didn’t care. Her decisions were all her own.

There were no regrets.

Then the pace of their embrace changed. Hugh cradled the back of her head in one hand while the other rested at the small of her back. He dragged her closer so she was intimately pressed against the length of his body. That slight possessiveness shallowed her breath. Awareness and anticipation tightened her nipples, had her breasts aching for his touch. All the while, the insistent bulge at the front of his breeches twitched at her thigh. Finally, at this advanced age, she would see what a man’s member looked like, perhaps even

have enough courage to touch it, find out how he enjoyed being pleased.

Over and over, he teased her with gentle kisses to the corners of her mouth. When she murmured encouragement, he nibbled her lower lip before moving his attention to the upper one and sucking on it. Sensation tripped through her veins as she explored his shoulders with her fingertips. Going further, he traced the outline of her lips with the tip of his tongue, and shivers moved down her spine from the wonder of it. Fires lit in her blood, and it was as if she hadn't been alive until he'd come 'round with kisses to light such a spark.

Frantic heat built within her core and spread outward to encompass her whole being. "So hot..."

"Agreed." Hugh brushed the hair from her forehead while he worried the seam of her mouth.

That satin warmth was so lovely Felicity opened for him and he tangled his tongue with hers. She couldn't help her moan of approval and need. Her whole world spun out of control so that she felt as if she were bobbing in a sea of sensation. Silk slid over satin as they dueled, and he taught her the finer points of kissing in the scandalous French style. It was heady and exciting; she couldn't have enough and proved a quick study. For several moments, they communicated in a language as old as time.

He shifted his weight, touched her breast, covering it with his hand, and she fairly vibrated off the sofa waiting for him to caress her. "If I'm going too fast, tell me." His breath warmed her chin, but his eyes were intense, the irises swallowed with dark desire.

That same emotion threatened to drown her, but oh she needed so much more. "It's all so new, so different, so—" A whimper cut off her words, for he brushed his fingertips around and around her breast, circling the tightened nipple through the thin fabric of her nightclothes. "Oh!"

"This is but teasing. Making you want more." With every pass of his fingers, that bud puckered further until she thought she might go mad if he didn't touch her there. Hugh

met her eyes. A wicked twinkle glimmered in the inky depths, and oh so slowly, he rubbed his fingers over the tight little nipple. “Is this what you want?”

A cry left her throat as hot sensation streaked from her breast to deep inside her core. *How very interesting.* “That was lovely,” she whispered as she arched her back, offering herself up for his consumption. “Like a zap of lightning.”

His chuckle made the flutters in her belly multiply. “More, then?”

“Yes, please.”

“So polite in the face of all the unspeakable things I’m about to do to you.” The rumble of his voice raised the hairs on her arms and further sent her spinning down a slippery slope to what, she had no idea. He rubbed the hardened tip, eased off her enough so he could give the same treatment to the other quivering mound. “Such perfect breasts,” he murmured as he manipulated the nipples with the pads of his thumbs, cupped her breasts, squeezed them with gentle pressure and then began the cycle all over again.

“Hugh! Oh, goodness.” Truly, it was wondrous. Felicity moaned. She squirmed from his exquisite torture. His touch was liberating and eye opening. No wonder women clamored to be ruined, talking about the act as if it was worth all the gossip. “I need... more, I suppose.” She had no idea what she wanted; she only knew that he could provide it. A ragged shout left her throat when he lightly pinched both tightened buds and then rolled them between his thumbs and forefingers. “How am I to survive this?”

“Don’t pop off this mortal coil just yet. We have only begun.” His chuckle echoed in the shadows. Then he dipped his head and took first one nipple into the warm cavern of his mouth, soon followed by the other, and in the process, he manipulated the tie keeping her robe closed. She thought she might expire right there so great were the sensations swamping her. Sadly, he pulled away. “There are entirely too many clothes separating us, and I want to see all of you without

barriers. Explore your body until you've gone mad. Or perhaps I will."

Blindly, she bumped her hips into his. "I want more of this."

"I adore how excited you are." He slid off her and the sofa. "Come." Once he'd pulled her to her feet and the robe slipped from her shoulders to puddle on the floor, he grabbed handfuls of the night rail's skirting, and soon tugged it up and off her body. It landed like a dollop of cream on the floor.

"Ah, Lissie, you are an artist's dream."

"Ooh!" A rush of cool air raised the fine hairs on her skin. Not knowing what else to do while he sent his hungry gaze up and down her form, she attempted to shield her private parts from his view. "I need a blanket," she managed to whisper from a tight throat.

"Nonsense. You were made to be adored." Hugh batted her hands away. "You're beautiful. I knew you would be."

"You did?" How often had he thought about just this moment?

"I did. Since that first kiss." With a rueful expression, he shrugged. "I won't apologize for it."

How interesting he'd thought of her like that, but then, hadn't she wondered the same about him? "Let me see you."

"In a moment." Seconds later, he knelt before her on one knee. He trailed his palms along the backs of her legs, and gooseflesh quickly followed. With another wicked chuckle, he nibbled kisses around her navel, licked and nipped the skin of her belly, her hips, her abdomen. The touch of his lips and the warmth of his breath sent shivers of erotic delight down her spine. "Such a treat." He caressed her hips, danced his fingers along the curve of her arse, squeezed those cheeks and laughed when she squealed. "I can't wait to teach you... everything, to taste you."

She didn't know what that meant, but the trembles dancing over her skin told her it would be heavenly. His attention sent so many sensations flying through her that she

couldn't focus on any. "Hugh, please, I... Oh!" He pressed his lips to her mons, and her knees wobbled. She dropped a hand to his shoulder. "What are you doing?"

"Doing exactly what I told you."

"It's so scandalous." If she was to be ruined, she wanted to do it in a wild manner so she wouldn't forget.

"That is the point. Why else do parents wish their children married off so quickly?"

"Even when we are old enough to either know better or have the scandal not matter?"

"It *is* rather ridiculous." Gently, he urged her legs apart, went so far as to encourage one of her knees over his shoulder. His fingers quested, probing, stretching, caressing between her thighs. Then his lips were on the part of her that was the center of her pleasure, and she squealed again. "It is my hope you will enjoy this," he whispered against her sensitive flesh. "My wife didn't particularly like this part."

Enjoy what? Part of what? She couldn't ask, for he'd started a campaign to drive her mad. "What... what..." *Drat his eyes.*

Her brain wouldn't form the words. Hugh licked that part of her and worried the swelling nubbin with his tongue until she shook with feelings she couldn't understand. Wave after wave of heated wonder cycled through her body while he continued to show his mastery at oral pleasure. Surely, she would dissolve into nothingness if he continued. Felicity put a trembling hand into his hair both in an effort to anchor him to her and push him away, and all the while, she shook from his attention.

And he made a feast of her as if he were a man starving.

"Do you... ah..." Oh, dear heavens, he would kill her. "Do you like doing that?" Her mother had certainly never told her about this part of intercourse. Or any of it, really. The knowledge she'd gleaned had come from books and the

whispers from a few of her friends who'd already been married, but they'd made it seem like a chore.

This was... not that.

"Absolutely. So sweet, so pure," he breathed against her skin, following the words with flicks of his tongue and licks to her flesh.

Pressure built and coiled deep within until she couldn't stand it any longer. On a particularly vigorous suckle, she cried out, or more precisely, she shattered into fractured shards of light and skewed sound. A surprised cry was wrenched from her throat, and she tightened her fingers in his hair. Threads of exquisite bliss wrapped around and through her unlike anything she'd ever known. She shook from head to toe, and then her knees no longer supported her weight.

For the first time in her thirty years, Felicity knew what it was to find carnal release.

"Let's see what other sounds you'll make." He caught her when she nearly collapsed to the floor in a boneless heap. "For this was only the beginning." Smug satisfaction threaded through his voice as he encouraged her once more onto the sofa. When she stared at him with an odd sense of lethargy and longing, he yanked his lawn shirt up and over his head, off his body to flutter away. Next, he toed out of his boots then shucked out of his breeches.

Felicity gasped as she stared. "Merciful heavens," she breathed in awe. "You are gorgeous. Like a god from Grecian literature."

"Ha!" He flashed a grin. "Never will I tire of your penchant for saying whatever is on your mind. At least it's not a complaint or a critique."

Heat went through her cheeks. "There is nothing I find offensive here." He truly was magnificent. The ridged planes of his abdomen had her yearning to touch and explore, and she knew a wild urge to bite one of those taut arse cheeks. *What has he done to me with this one session?* She eyed his aroused length. The proud, veined shaft bobbed with his every

movement as it sprang from a dark nest of curls. For all her forward thinking in other matters, she knew little about the sizes of the various body parts involved in intercourse. “How will *that*...” She waved a hand to encompass *all* of him. “...fit inside me?” Her mother never spoke about girth. Of course. Did he think her pathetic? Would this cause him to reject her? Panic rose in her chest.

“We’ll fit. I promise.” Those two words immediately brought order and calm to her concern. Little by little, she was coming to trust him. Hugh joined her on the sofa, once more covering her with his hard, warm body that chased away the February chill in the air. Instead of going straightaway to claiming her, he spent time caressing every inch of her skin, just as he’d promised, brought her to the shimmering peak again, kissed her lips, and ramped her need until she was once more shaking with madness.

“Oh!” Felicity moaned and writhed beneath him. He was sin and her salvation, and she drowned beneath the waves of joy he brought her. “I can’t survive...” His lips, tongue, and teeth on her nipples drove her slowly, hotly, madly to the brink, and she adored every second of the ride. Tingles danced over her skin. Throbs rocked her core. Did he know what he was doing to her?

“You can, because you’re curious.” And he started the process all over again.

“Hugh!” To mitigate losing herself in sensation, Felicity began an exploration of her own. She swept her palms along the muscled planes of his back, slipped her fingers over the sculpted chest sprinkled with dark, coarse hair. How did he keep himself fit? It was something she’d need to ask. Oh, he was perfection and she wanted to taste every inch of his person. In fact, daring much, she put her lips to his chest, gave his skin a lick merely to see what it would feel like. The sandalwood and orange scent of him infiltrated her nostrils, and the slight saltiness of sweat away on her tongue along with an earthiness that was pure male. *Intoxicating!* She stroked his shoulders, placed a line of kisses beneath his jaw. “Exquisite.” There simply wasn’t enough time to explore.

“Hardly.” But his moan reined in her wandering thoughts and fueled her onward. Felicity reached a hand between their bodies to grasp his stiff shaft. The hardened length twitched in her palm.

“Gentle, else this will be over before it starts.” Strain edged his whispered command. “I’d rather not have us both disappointed.”

How interesting. “Then how?”

“Like this.” He cupped her hand and pressed it to his manhood, showed her how to curl her fingers around his straining length and move her hand up and down from root to tip. “You can change your approach, add your own flair, but any caress will arouse me.” As if satin moved upon steel, she reveled in how the organ twitched with each pass. Yet it was soft, hot, and pliant to her touch. All too soon, a shuddering moan escaped him. His eyelids flickered and he bumped his hips against her hand. “Lissie...” Then he pressed his lips into the crook of her shoulder and neck. “You may not have the experience, but you drive me to distraction with your touch.”

“I’m glad.”

“Once you gain confidence, I shall be in a huge spot of bother.”

A grin curved her lips. “I look forward to it. May I continue?”

“Of course.”

She moved her fingers to his stones and gently fondled them. There was so much about him she didn’t know, but she was willing to spend days solving his mysteries. And that shocked her. “I never knew a man’s form could be so... wondrous,” she whispered as she once more caressed him in an effort to memorize every inch of him in the event he ultimately rejected her.

“I can almost hear you thinking again,” he said against her neck. “I would never shun you or break the engagement due to inexperience. Kissing and carnal endeavors will always

require learning and practice to perfect.” The low rumble of his voice added to the breathless urgency of the moment.

The words brought tears to her eyes, and she stilled on his shaft. “Thank you.” Clearly, he was much different than her last fiancé.

“You were made for pleasure; these curves, this body are a luscious delight.” Hugh took her hands and brought them up, pressed them into the decorative pillow near her head. “Already, I’m nearly insane with desire to claim you, but know this. I’m both humbled and honored to share this moment with you.” When he nudged her thighs apart, she wriggled beneath him, both fearing and craving what came next.

If he said anything else nearly as sweet or comforting, she’d become a watering pot, and that would surely ruin the act. So, she looked at him, suddenly wary. “I’m trying not to be fearful...”

“Understandable, but there is nothing to fear in this.” He brushed his lips over hers while at the same time the head of his member kissed her opening. It left her anxious and wanting. “There will be pain.”

“It is how we know we’re alive, yes?”

“I adore how practical you are, in everything.” Then, with another kiss, Hugh penetrated her with a forceful thrust that seated him deeply and irrevocably impaled her.

They were joined as one.

“Ah!” Felicity cried out. Yes, there was a pinprick of pain and she clung to his hands, but as he began to move within her body, currents of pleasure made the discomfort a memory.

Each stroke was gentle and tender. His every touch, every push, heated her blood, put his stamp all over her, yet it also bonded her with him whether she wished it or not. After this night, she would never be the same. It was an odd realization, especially after the past years she’d gone through. Wrenching her hands from his, she looped her arms about his

shoulders, held him close, slipped a hand to his nape, reveled in the slide of her form beneath his. Through it all, he taught her how to match his rhythm, how to meet his thrusts with her hips.

And it was glorious.

They crashed together, moved as if one, and eventually, after a few fits and starts, it was as effortless as dancing, except infinitely more fulfilling.

All too soon, familiar pressure circled, looking for a surcease. Hugh must have felt it too, for he quickened his pace, his strokes fast, hard and oh so deep that she nearly fainted from the exquisite sensations accosting her.

“Oh, oh, goodness. I feel as if I might break apart.”

“That is the point.” His breathing was as labored as hers and still he worked her over, his hips moving, their bodies irrevocably joined.

Then Felicity shattered. There was the wonderful feeling of flying, of falling into a valley made of white, sparkling light, where she was weightless and deaf to everything else around her. With his name on her lips and a scream exiting her throat, she tumbled down, down, down in a rush of bliss that rippled through every nerve ending as contractions pulsed strong in her core.

With one last thrust, Hugh followed her into ecstasy. A groan came from him as he ground his hips into hers to prolong the act, but finally, he collapsed on top of her while murmuring something she couldn't quite make out.

“Merciful heavens,” she said as she tried to catch her breath but of course a hiccup thwarted that.

Before she could do much more, Hugh rolled onto his side and pulled her into his arms, curling his body around hers with a chuckle. The unconscious protectiveness of that brought tears to her eyes. Never had she been treated with such respect or care.

“I trust you enjoyed your first foray into carnal pleasure?” His hot breath steamed the side of her face, and the

exhausted rumble of his voice sent a new wave of awareness skittering over her skin.

“Oh, yes. Very much.” *Hiccup, hiccup!* She rested her arms over his. “Hopefully, I wasn’t too horrid at it. I couldn’t bear it if you were to...” Fear kept her from finishing the sentence.

“You were amazing. Please don’t worry over your future.”

“I’ll try.” Her eyelids drooped and a tear escaped to her cheek. “However, this changes... everything.” How could one man subtly redirect her thoughts and her intent?

Hiccup!

“We can discuss that on the morrow. For the moment, rest. I’ll escort you upstairs to your bed in a bit.” The brush of his lips on her nape sent delicious shivers down her spine.

Perhaps it was best that she didn’t think. It was a new experience and truth be told, she wouldn’t mind having another go ‘round, but she’d need to think about how best to proceed with him.

Eventually.

Chapter Nine



February 10, 1818

“No, no, not a mouse! Get it away!” The soft, mumbled words nudged Hugh awake a few hours later as the carriage-style clock on the fireplace mantle delicately chimed the three o’clock hour.

With a shiver, he stirred, popped open his eyes while confusion ran amok in his head, for why would he have been dreaming about a mouse and in a feminine voice? The candles had long ago extinguished, leaving the library in darkness and shadows. Then memories from the night before came back to him with startlingly realization at the same time the feeling of having a woman in his arms sank into his addled brain.

Damn and blast.

He had claimed Felicity’s body last night, initiated her into the carnal realm, and it had been one of the most moving experiences of his life. Even now, as he lay on his side with her snuggled tightly against him and her back to his front with his arms around her, the euphoria of that coupling still clung to him. Had she only consented to it due to the wine she’d drunk, or had she truly shared that desire?

Now more than ever, he was quite serious about making certain their engagement was real, for she had unexpectedly fascinated him on far too many levels. And her fear of rodents was beyond adorable.

Nuzzling the soft skin where her neck joined her shoulder, he whispered, “There are no mice here, Lissie.” She was a delightful bundle, and her satiny skin was a temptation. As he brushed the underside of one of her breasts, he said,

“Time to wake. You need to get to bed lest my daughter wander down here and find us together.” The fact that he continued to use a shortened version of her name spoke to how much he’d already grown used to her being there.

It would be scandal, of course, but not overly much since he *was* engaged to Felicity. However, Jane—or anyone else—didn’t need to see them in such a position. Yet part of him wanted to spend the remainder of the night with her... because he could.

“Hmm?” With sleep still clinging to her voice, Felicity turned onto her back, and then her eyes opened. The blue green depths were hidden from him in the inky darkness, but he could just make out the curve of her lips as she smiled. “Hugh?” She lifted her head, looked out at the room at large. “Why are we in the library?” Before he could answer, she gasped, sat up too swiftly, and banged her forehead on his chin. “Ow!”

Pain went through his face, and as he rubbed his chin, Hugh struggled into a sitting position. When she did the same, he chuckled. “Calm yourself. Don’t you remember what happened not a few hours past?” Had his performance been that underwhelming?

“I remember.” She rested a hand on his thigh, and shock ricocheted through his insides. “My head is a little muzzy from the wine, but I remember what you and I did.”

“Uh, did you enjoy it?” Would she cry foul?

“Oh, yes. It was... life-altering.” Yet she sprang from the sofa as if being near him had burned her. “I need to return to my room,” she whispered as she cast about for her clothing. “Good heavens, I’m naked. *You* are naked!”

Unable to help himself, Hugh chuckled again. “You certainly appreciated that fact at midnight.”

“I can’t allow myself to be distracted by you. No doubt it would end in disaster.” Quickly, she tugged the night rail over her head.

Once her glorious body was covered, a bit of the temptation she represented faded, but not all of it. There was something about Felicity that beckoned to him, called out to him, and it was much like he'd felt with his wife all those years ago.

“Would that be such a horrible thing?” He snatched up his abandoned breeches, shoved his legs into the garment one at a time. “I mean, we *are* engaged.” And why shouldn't he want it to be real? Already, she'd fascinated him beyond the means of a physical release, but there was still a wall of fear or bitterness there that served as an obstacle between them. “It will be beneficial for us both. Even you must know that.”

“Do I?” When she turned to face him, the shadows hid the emotions on her face, but there was plenty at play in her voice. “I suppose I should be grateful that you want a future with me, because I'm not a woman anyone would willingly seek out.”

“Stop that.” After plucking his shirt from the floor, he closed the distance between them as she donned her thin robe. “Haven't I shown you how desirable you are?” When she scoffed, he sailed onward as he yanked the shirt over his head and smoothed it over his torso. “Haven't I demonstrated my resolve by changing the way I've thought about the engagement?”

“I suppose, but men lie. Perhaps you are only using me.” A tiny catch in her voice betrayed her unease. “After all, why would the son of an earl wish to marry... me?”

Honestly, she deserved a bit of the truth. “Why?” Gently, he rested his hands on her shoulders, keeping her in place when she would have broken contact. “You are infinitely more intelligent, entertaining, and curious than half the women in the *ton*.” While peering into her eyes in the dark, an idea popped into his mind. What he needed to do was properly court her. That more than anything else would prove how earnest he was.

When she blew out a breath, the escaped air warmed his chin. “Is that true?”

“It is.” Surprisingly, he wouldn’t have told her that if it wasn’t. “The circumstances aren’t ideal, I know, but you’ve managed to draw my daughter out of her shell in a mere week, when I have been alone with her for the past five years. And God, your acerbic wit and plainspoken tongue are refreshing in this world of false fronts and smoked facades.”

“Oh, I...” Laying a hand on his chest, she sighed. “Somehow, you make me believe you, want things I haven’t since I first came out in society, before everything went eschew.”

“And some callous, immature earl made you hate men, hate yourself—doubt yourself.” What he should do is pay a call on him and at the very least land him a facer. “By the by, you never told me his name.”

“Whose name?”

He slid his hands upward to frame her face, tipped her head backward until she met his gaze once more. “The earl who broke your engagement, the one person in this world who caused you to throw a cloak of thorns about yourself and hide away from at least nine years of your life.”

“Uh.” Her swallow was audible. “That will remain my secret, for I don’t want you to do anything stupid and further plunge your name into gossip.”

“That would assume you care what happens to me.” The knowledge that she might sent a bubble of happiness through his chest. “I’m not given to bouts of spontaneity.”

“Perhaps you aren’t, but you also don’t need to stalk him through Mayfair for a chance to punch him. It was a long time ago.”

“Except you haven’t healed from it yet. You use that man’s missteps as a stick to measure the rest of us, and quite frankly, I think you expect us—me—to fail so you can keep me at arm’s length. As a way to protect you from further hurt.”

For long moments, she regarded him. “Can you blame me?”

“No. What he did was unforgivable, and it marred your reputation besides while he went on to live his life. But because you are holding that grudge—unintentionally or not—you are keeping yourself a prisoner.” Daring much, he gently claimed her lips with his before stepping away. “Perhaps if I broke his nose, you’d be more inclined for closure.”

“Neither have you healed from losing your wife,” she added in a soft voice, and as a catch developed beneath his ribs, she continued. “Isn’t that a prison of sorts as well?” When he didn’t immediately answer, she stepped away from his touch.

“It is different.”

“Perhaps, but no less binding and allows you to hide.” She shrugged. “If you want to spend the rest of your life with me, we should work on either scaling walls for each of us or tearing them down.”

“Ah, so now you are suddenly wise on top of everything else?” He admired her for that.

“I’m not certain, but if I *were* to marry, I wouldn’t want to sabotage the union immediately with hidden hurts or unhealed wounds. Sometimes, those things are worse than secrets or lies.” She took a seat on the sofa, tucked her legs beneath her, and looked at him with expectation. “Do you wish to tell me about her? I have gathered from talking with Jane you haven’t really done that, preferring to keep all those memories and emotions to yourself.”

While it was true he hadn’t talked about his wife’s death for years, could he do so with composure now? To the woman he’d like to wed next?

Nothing would change unless he did.

Bloody hell.



Felicity didn't exactly know how to broach the subject, but they had gone days without talking about anything deep or personal, and after giving her body to him, he at least owed her his history.

And something about sitting in the dark invited confidences.

“Ah, Lissie, how did life come to this?” His whispered inquiry in the shadows sent a thrill down her spine, but it was the intimate sound of the shortened name that squeezed at her heart. He shoved a hand through his hair. “In some ways it still feels like yesterday when I lost Amelia; in others, it seems an eternity.”

“I can understand that. Grief is a fluid thing, coming back when you aren't prepared.” She followed his pacing with her gaze but said nothing else for fear it would distract him.

“We'd met and married quickly, for I was the one who fell first. That is apparently how it works with me.” He paused at a bookshelf, rested a curled fist on the shelf as he bowed his head. “Amelia was the first woman to capture my heart; the first woman I loved, and when we said our vows, I considered myself the most fortunate of men.”

Every word he spoke rang of romance and fairy stories. A sliver of jealousy went through Felicity's heart, for she'd never had that even though her first fiancé had promised the world. He'd said he would have given her everything she'd ever wanted... until he'd kissed her a few times, and she hadn't come up to the mark, apparently.

“And well you should. Love is something many people never find.” She certainly hadn't, and quite frankly, she didn't know if she ever would. Hugh was a good sort, and he meant well, she suspected, but to fall in love with him? That would require far too much trust than she knew if she could give.

“Honestly, I adored her, would have done anything for her.” Slowly, he gravitated back to the sofa and then dropped onto that piece of furniture beside her. “When we discovered she was with child, I didn't think my life could become any better.” He shook his head. “Never once did she complain

about anything or question how I made my income or what our future would hold. She was quite content with me merely for myself.”

“As it should be. Why marry someone for what they might become later? That makes no sense.” Felicity frowned. “From what I could manage to piece together, you had ten years together as a family, correct?”

“We did. We had Jane shortly after we’d married. When she was eight years old, my wife fell ill, contracted some sort of wasting disease which attacked her lungs.” Planting his elbows on his knees, he held his head in his hands. “For two years she fought against it. I had more than a few physicians in to look at her; there was only so much blood letting and other questionable ‘cures’ I could watch Amelia endure before I put a stop to it. In the end, she simply wasn’t strong enough to survive.”

“And you were left with a bright-eyed and curious ten-year-old daughter who didn’t understand why her world was sent topsy turvy.” Caught up in the tale, Felicity rested a hand on his arm. The muscles went taut beneath her fingertips. “Especially when you pulled away from her.” Some of it was conjecture on her part, for no one had told her the truth regarding his past, and Jane certainly never alluded to it unless she was lonely.

“I didn’t mean to.” When he looked at her, his eyes glittered with moisture in the shadows. “There was so much to attend to after Amelia died, and I hadn’t counted on the profound grief, the emptiness she’d left, the feeling of being at sixes and sevens.” Emotion graveled his voice. “Don’t misunderstand me. I love my daughter, but she reminds me so much of my wife that it keeps me in grief each time I look at her.”

“While I can’t venture to say I understand what you are going through, don’t you think that withdrawal from Jane has affected her deeply?” She tightened her fingers on his arm when he would have pulled away. “She is hurting too and needs her father.”

“I don’t know what to say to her.”

“Then don’t say anything. Just sit with her, keep her company. She has been so used to being alone I fear for her well-being.” Felicity blew out a breath. “I suspect there are times when she thinks she’d be better off leaving this mortal coil.” It hadn’t been confirmed, but came from all she’d observed from being around the girl this past week.

“What?” Shock propelled the word into the air as he straightened his spine. “My daughter wishes to do harm to herself?”

“I haven’t asked, but she is wildly unhappy and lonely most of the time. If she didn’t have her sketch books or other interests, I shudder to think of what might become of her.”

“But you are here now for her.” Hugh clutched at her hand, perhaps using it as an anchor. “Surely that is making a difference.”

“As much as I would like to hope it is, I am not a replacement for her mother or her father.” Holding his gaze with hers, she leaned closer to him. “Your daughter needs *you*, Hugh. She needs that connection as much as you do. Let her talk with you about her mother, about Amelia. There is no sin in memories, and they can be healing as well.” When he didn’t answer, she sighed. “Don’t let either you or she become more lost than you already are.”

“How do you know I am?”

An unladylike snort escaped her. “You are good at hiding, and only a person who also has that talent can see it.” She squeezed his fingers. “Think about it. Jane is your family, the daughter you and Amelia had together. Don’t disrespect your wife’s memory by leaving the girl to her own devices. Soon she will go away to finishing school and her whole life will change from experiences gleaned there. You don’t want to have that gulf between you widen.”

“True.”

At least in this she knew of what she spoke. “No matter how consumed with business you are, please do this. I...” Her

voice wavered. “I wish my own father had spent time with me when I was Jane’s age, for I can’t help but feel we’ve drifted apart and aren’t close.”

“I didn’t know that.”

She nodded. “He is a banker, you know, so you and he aren’t that different. Don’t make his same mistakes.” If she could do this for Jane, then it was all to the good.

“Thank you.” His voice sounded choked. “It never occurred to me the harm I was doing.” Seconds later, he leaned back into the sofa then he grabbed her about the waist and hauled her into his lap, chuckling when she squealed with surprise. “Having you here is good for all of us, I think, and I will try to change, to repair my relationship with Jane as long as you promise you will stop rejecting overtures I make that are supposed to be romantic or arguing with the words I speak to you in honesty.”

Heat went through her cheeks, both from his gentle admonishment as well as the highly scandalous position she occupied. “I do have a tendency to do that, don’t I?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve never met a woman with as many prickles as you have or a woman as adverse to anything that smacks as a compliment or gift.” His hands on her hips had tingles of awareness dancing over her skin. “Obstinate as a bull.” But the hint of amusement in his tone softened the teasing.

Remarkably, she shivered with anticipation, for there was something about this man she couldn’t quite figure out or put a finger on. Being with him made her feel as if she’d wasted so much time pushing people away. “I am a work in progress.”

“Aren’t we all?” he asked softly before slipping his arms about her, urging her closer, and then he claimed her lips in a gentle, non-demanding kiss that lit tiny fires in her blood all over again. When he pulled slightly away, he said, “Wasn’t there a question you wanted to ask of me when you sought me out earlier tonight?”

Dear heavens, she'd forgotten in all the heady goodness she'd shared with him. "Yes, of course." Giving into a shiver, Felicity rested her hands on his solid shoulders. "Please let Jane attend your parents' Valentine's Day ball. She can have a gown ordered, and you can be the proud father at having your daughter on your arm, to show her that you do indeed love her still."

"Would it make *you* happy?"

She frowned. "I suppose. Jane deserves something wonderful in life."

"So do you." Hugh slid his hands down to clutch her hips and tug her flush to his body. The proof of his renewed arousal was quite evident, and that sent heat pinwheeling through his insides. "I will agree on one condition."

"Oh?"

"That you attend as well. In a new gown. No doubt Father will want to announce the engagement as a way to ensure I'll behave and not fall back on my roguish ways, and..."

"Yes?" The word sailed out in a breathless wisp.

"That you reserve me a waltz. There is nothing I enjoy more than seducing a lady within the bounds of a dance." He followed the inquiry by putting a line of feather weighted kisses along the lace at her bodice while he eased his hands upward to cup her breasts.

This man would drive her to madness before long, but perhaps a woman needed that at least once in her life. "I promise. On both counts." Then she framed his face with her palms, and daring much, she initiated a kiss and hoped she was good enough at it that he wouldn't pull away.

Long moments later, he did not, and it took another hour before either of them sought their respective beds, for they had been distracted by delicious explorations.

Chapter Ten



February 11, 1818

It had been two days since that fateful night in the library where he and Felicity had come together, not once but twice. The memory of how she'd felt moving against him, how the heat of her had enveloped him, how the scent of her still teased his nose, how the soft sounds of pleasure she'd made had the power to harden his shaft even when he wasn't with her.

That one night had changed the course of his life, for now more than ever he was convinced that marrying her was what fate wished of him.

Perhaps it had taken an act of misunderstood scandal to jar him from his melancholy, for that night he'd also opened up to her about his wife, how he missed her and felt lost without her. Felicity had reminded him of his obligation to Jane and how he needed to recommit to his daughter, for she needed him the most in this season of her life. Seeing the relationship through her eyes and perspective had made the issue as clear as crystal for him.

I must do better.

That was largely why he'd not set appointments in his schedule for the day and why he tracked his daughter to earth in his study of all places.

“Jane? Is all well? Shouldn't you have a lesson during this hour?” When she brought her head up and focused on him instead of her sketchbook, he was struck again by how much she resembled Amelia, in every way except the eyes. Those were all his.

“Calm yourself, Papa. The lesson in mathematics ended ten minutes prior. I merely wished to be alone with my drawings.” When she frowned, it was as if he were peering at a younger version of her mother. “Do you need the room? I can relocate upstairs.”

“No!” Holding up a hand, he shook his head. “I meant, no, I don’t need the room, but please stay. I wished to talk with you in any event.” With a frown of his own, he glanced about the room. “Unless you have plans with Miss Hixton?” Damn, but he wanted to seek Felicity out, steal a few kisses... Ignoring the heat going up the back of his neck, he stared at her in expectation.

“We have a gown fitting later this afternoon, but I have nothing pressing just now.” A hint of curiosity flitted across her face. “Is all well with *you*?”

“I hope so.” Knots of worry pulled in his belly. “Come and sit with me.” He gestured to one of the leather chairs that reposed in front of the desk at which she sat. “We haven’t had a serious conversation together for an age.”

Jane snorted. “Or at all since Mama died?” she asked with a decided challenge in her voice, but she stood and came around the desk. “I’ll wager Miss Hixton put you up to this.”

“Does it matter?” Had his daughter always been possessed of a tart mouth or was it a product of having Felicity in the mix?

“I suppose not.” With a sigh, she dropped into one of the chairs. “However, it is odd after five years you all of a sudden wish to talk.” She narrowed her eyes. “It took a forced engagement to make you remember you had a daughter?”

“I deserve that.” Hugh sat in the matching chair and turned toward her. “In that vein, I realize I haven’t been the best of fathers over the years.” Damn, this would be more difficult than he’d thought. “Uh, first, let me apologize for neglecting you since your mother died.”

She sucked in a breath. “I have felt abandoned, as if you stopped loving me.” To his mortification, tears welled in

her eyes. “You preferred the company of all sorts of women over spending time with me; I assumed it was me you took exception to, almost as if you blamed me for Mama dying.”

The choked, tearful admission wrenched his heart. “Ah, sweeting, that isn’t the reason at all.” Needing to reassure himself that his only child didn’t hate him, Hugh took one of her hands in his. God, but she was so fragile, so delicate. Was she eating enough? Taking care of herself? “I have purposefully kept myself busy, away from the house to hide, to forget how lovely life was when your mother was alive. Having her taken away shattered me, perhaps in more ways than I could have anticipated, and every time I look at you, I see her. It brings back that grief all over again until it feels as if I’m drowning.”

Perhaps there was freedom in speaking the truth, for the ever-present weight on his shoulders began to lessen.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Tears fell to Jane’s cheeks. “It would have made things that much simpler.”

“I don’t know.” He shook his head. “There was a bit of shame there. Some embarrassment.” A lump of emotion formed in his chest. “I feared I might lose you too so thought to keep you at arm’s length to mitigate the pain.” That was something he’d never shared with anyone before, and the shock plowed through his chest. “But I realize now that was a mistake. You are the only thing I have left of your mother,” his voice faltered, and moisture filled his eyes, “and for that I should have held you close, made sure you felt loved and protected.”

A sob came from her. “I have been so lonely, Papa!” She brushed at the tears on her cheeks. “So sad because I miss her so much, but you refused to talk about her with me, refused to keep her alive through memories...”

“I’m so sorry.” The hole in his heart threatened to consume him. “Please forgive me. I want to do better by you. You and I share that loneliness, that grief, so perhaps we can help each other heal, so we can find happiness again.”

“But Mama will always be in our hearts. We can’t let her fade.” She left her chair to throw herself on her knees in front of him. “Please don’t continue to be absent from my life, Papa. I need you. It would tear me apart if you left too.”

“Oh, poppet, I won’t go anywhere.” Using the term of endearment he used to call her as a young child caused something deep inside him to snap. Tears wet his cheeks as he left his chair to bring her into a standing position then engulfed her into a hug. “Never again will I ignore you or abandon you. I promise you that.”

How could he have forgotten how dear his daughter was? Lost for the moment in emotion, Hugh held her to him and for several minutes they cried together.

“I miss her so much sometimes,” Jane whispered into his shoulder as she clung to him.

“So do I, but she wouldn’t want us to spend the rest of our lives maudlin or wishing we were with her.” Holding her ever tighter, Felicity’s words went round his mind. He whispered against her ear, “You are so loved, Jane. I’d temporarily forgotten how much, and you are the most valuable treasure in my life. Please don’t ever think you aren’t worthy or wanted.”

That only made her cry harder, and he held her for as long as the storm raged. It drove home exactly how lost they’d both been and how he didn’t want that for his life any longer. Eventually, the emotions passed, and he released her then offered her his handkerchief.

“Thank you.” She sighed as she mopped at her face while he scrubbed at the moisture on his own cheeks. Relief reflected in her dark brown eyes. “I appreciate the talk, but now I’m a mess for the remainder of my lessons.”

“Nonsense. You are lovely.” Once he’d resumed his seat, he looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. “So like your mother.” Only now, that didn’t make him incredibly sad. He was proud that he had such a special daughter, and he hoped that he would strive every day to show her exactly that.

“By the by, Miss Hixton tells me you enjoy sketching and fashion. Will you let me see some of your drawings?”

Surprise jumped into her face. “You are truly interested?”

“I am.”

“You don’t share Grandmother’s views that working a trade is demeaning to members of the *beau monde*?”

He chuckled. “Dearest, I am about to open a counting house with my best friend to make a living, so no. I do not share those views.”

“All those business meetings weren’t attempts to dodge me then?” she asked as she plucked her sketchpad from the desktop.

“They were not. I need to look after you somehow without relying on my father’s coin, and you’ll have finishing school soon.” How would he survive that knowing she was away from home and out of his care?

“Must I?” She handed him the book.

“I rather think you should. Like it or not, you are a member of the *beau monde*, and an earl’s granddaughter.” As Hugh flipped through the book, the drawings of gowns in varying styles, cuts, some with trailing skirting made him gasp from the artistic quality and specialized talent. “These are lovely. Almost as if the women wearing these gowns will step right off the pages and into my study.” Truly, his daughter was amazing.

“When Miss Hixton told me much the same, I wasn’t certain I believed her, but since you’ve confirmed it, I suppose I should.” Happiness and pleasure filled her eyes. “I want to try my hand at designing a gown, at seeing it come to life through the fabric and fripperies.”

“Then we shall take the steps to see that come to fruition.” An idea popped into his brain. “Why not design one for Miss Hixton? She would no doubt enjoy that even if she might grouse at the expense or say your mind should be on your studies.”

Jane giggled. “She does lecture me constantly about that, which was a condition for me to attend the Valentine’s Day ball.”

“Ah.” Felicity had neglected to tell him that. But then, they *were* rather distracted that night. Suddenly, the urge to see her, to hear her voice, grew with intensity. “I tend to agree with her. She’s quite practical.”

“Miss Hixton is interesting and easy to talk with. Though she isn’t fond of men, I find her sense of humor engaging at times.” Then Jane’s expression sobered as she sat in the chair she’d previously vacated. “Papa?”

“Hmm?” He turned another page in the sketchbook and his breath stalled in his lungs, for it was a rendering of Felicity, caught in profile and clearly not aware she was being sketched. A faint smile curved her lips while she read a book in her lap.

“Do you truly intend to marry Miss Hixton?”

“I would like to, but we are content to enjoy a long engagement while she comes ‘round to the idea of marriage.” Did it sound as maddening as he assumed? “Until then, we are learning about each other, as sort of a courtship.” But he frowned even as he tamped down on the urge to smirk, for he’d certainly learned some of the secrets of her body two nights ago. “Are you opposed to the match?” If she was, would he break the engagement? Damn, but Felicity’s fragile confidence would shatter, and his promise would become a lie.

“It’s lovely having her around, and you’ve been a different person since she’s come to live here.” For long moments she remained quiet with her head tilted slightly to one side. “Did you know the word felicity means happiness?”

“I did not.” Yet it made sense, for that was what he was beginning to feel in her company. Well, one of the things.

Speculation filled her eyes. “If having her in your life brings you that, then you’ll find no opposition from me, but I don’t know if I will call her mama.”

“I’m sure she will understand. Whatever you are comfortable with.” Did she want to be a part of a family again? He cleared his throat. “She has certainly brought us closer, so it might be a good thing for us all, and she can help guide you the closer you move to a Come Out.”

His daughter scoffed. “I am not interested in that at the moment. There are far more weighty things on my mind.”

What did she mean by that? When his daughter didn’t elaborate, he continued. “Then she can support you in whatever you’d like to do.”

Jane nodded. “She hinted at such, but she doesn’t mention being married. I’ll wager she’s still trying to come to terms being engaged to you.”

“That doesn’t instill confidence.” When he gave her the sketchbook, he sighed. “I’ll need to put more effort into romancing her.”

“Is that what *you* want?”

This time he allowed a grin. “I believe I do.” After the events of the other night, he wanted Felicity in every sense of the word. It was pleasant having someone to talk with in the middle of the night, or having someone to share the burden of parenting with, and her reticence to all things romantic or domestic was a challenge he looked forward to solving.

“Then court her delicately not overtly. She won’t respond well to that. Meanwhile, I’ll distract her with using her as a model for the gown.” After a deep breath, she released it. “Eventually, one hopes, she’ll be unable to resist your charm.”

A chuckle left his throat. “Aren’t you the optimistic one?”

Jane shrugged. “It’s a new world for all of us, I suppose.” Then she turned to a blank page in the book. “Let me sketch you. I have a bit of time before my next lesson.”

Chapter Eleven



Later that afternoon

When Jane went on to her French lesson, Hugh went to seek out Felicity, but the butler informed him she'd popped out for an errand. Uncommon disappointment had come over him, and he'd had no choice but to be left to his own devices, which meant he spent an hour with his account books and made certain they were current.

As the long-case clock on the floor above chimed the four o'clock hour, he closed his ledger book, stood, and then stretched. Since it was nearing time for tea and his stomach had experienced a few pangs of hunger, he was determined once more to search out his fiancée and ask her to share the afternoon repast with him. Perhaps he would steal a kiss or two, just to keep her at sixes and sevens.

But as he climbed the stairs, the delightful sound of a waltz being played on the piano met his ears. The talent Felicity displayed in creating the music was incredible; she hadn't been lying when she said she had an affinity. Suddenly, he very much wanted to hear her sing as well. Then the rumble of a man's voice clearly instructing someone in the steps of the dance punctuated the music. Ah, that must be Jane's dancing master, her last lesson of the day.

"Stop, stop, stop! Miss Ridgeway simply isn't comprehending the steps." Annoyance threaded through the dancing master's voice.

"Calm down, Mr. Ignatius." Gentle admonition echoed in Felicity's voice. "I don't believe Miss Ridgeway learned the

steps to the Continental waltz, so therefore, you can't judge her harshly for it."

"Then she is behind in her tutelage, since I was only hired six months ago." The dancing master shook his head. "I should rectify that immediately. Every young lady who will enter society needs these skills in her possession."

Hugh paused at the open doorway and peered in. Felicity sat at a piano, her fingers resting over the keyboard while Jane and the dancing master had paused in the center of the room. Some of the furniture had been shoved against the walls to allow for dancing.

"I originally fumbled but I'm quite cognizant of how the steps go," Jane rejoined with plenty of haughtiness in her voice. "Just because you haven't taught me something doesn't mean I'm a complete dunce at it."

From out in the corridor, Hugh tamped down on the urge to chuckle. Jane had a backbone, and she wouldn't let anyone boss her. He knew a certain pride in that.

"Perhaps I should demonstrate the technique with Miss Hixton," the dancing master said with a healthy dose of annoyance. "Miss Ridgeway can play the piano."

Hugh narrowed his eyes. Why the devil was the dancing master teaching his fifteen-year-old daughter such a scandalous dance such as a Continental waltz? She was far too young despite what the other man said. Before he could offer a protest and announce his presence, his daughter responded.

Jane scoffed. "That is not where my talent lies."

"No matter. We shall go through the dance without music," the dancing master said as he held out a hand to Felicity. "Come, Miss Hixton. Let us share a dance."

From his vantage point at the door, Hugh frowned. Swift shards of jealousy stabbed through his chest to see Felicity in another man's arms. He didn't like that by half. She was his fiancée and if anyone was going to dance with her or demonstrate those steps for his daughter, it would be him.

He cleared his throat as he came into the room. “Apologies for interrupting your lesson, Jane, but you needn’t learn this particular set.”

All three of them looked at him as he approached, and he was acutely conscious that Felicity’s regard was slightly relieved.

“Why not, Papa?” There was a decided pout on Jane’s face. “Do you not consider me clever enough?”

“Of course not, but it’s rather a dance for older, more experienced people.”

“Ah, because you consider it too scandalous.” She tossed her head. “I can learn.”

“Dear heart, you will be the death of me, I think,” he said with a smile while exchanging an amused glance with Felicity. “However, I would be happy to demonstrate the steps with Miss Hixton, since she *is* my fiancée.”

A slight blush stained her cheeks. “If you’re sure? It isn’t one I’m proficient in.”

“Yes, I’m certain.” As he came closer to her, Hugh held out hand. “One quick dance. Either Jane can play the piano or Mr. Ignatius can.” That would serve the presumptuous man right to have to assist.

“Very well.” The dancing master gave him a half-bow from the waist. “Miss Ridgeway, please take a seat on the bench. I shall leave early, for I have another appointment yet this afternoon.”

“Fair enough.” Hugh nodded and then closed his fingers over Felicity’s when she put them into his palm. “Jane, whenever you are ready.” Then he led his fiancée to the middle of the room that had been cleared for dancing.

“Don’t mind the stumbles, Papa,” she said as she took a seat, and the dancing master exited the room. “My fingers are not as adept as Miss Ridgeway’s.”

“That doesn’t matter as much as gaining satisfaction while indulging in the music,” Felicity said with a faint grin

curving her lips. When she transferred her gaze to him, and amusement crinkled the delicate corners of her eyes, a queer tremble moved through his heart. “Not everyone will be proficient at everything they set out to do, but that shouldn’t lessen the joy of doing it.”

“You are quite wise.” How odd that he felt lighter, happier even, than he had in many years, Hugh set them into motion the second Jane began her opening notes. When she stumbled as her toe caught in her hem, he shifted his arms more tightly around her. “Concentrate, Miss Hixton. It should be as natural as breathing.”

“Well, as you know, even that is sometimes an issue for me when I get the hiccups.” She giggled. Awareness rippled along his skin. Why the hell did he want her so acutely?

“It’s as unique as you.” Feeling oddly not himself, he swept her into the first turn of the dance. The candlelight made the room cozy and the woman in his arms wore vulnerability and her thorns like a garment.

One charm of the Continental waltz was the ability to hold one’s partner closer without raising eyebrows, and with each dip and turn of the steps, their bodies brushed. Damn if he didn’t crave her lips pressed against his, to taste her again. A nodcock idea, especially with his daughter in attendance, so he pushed the thought away in order to concentrate on moving with her over the floor. The whisper of her skirting, the way it twisted about his boots while she slightly tightened her fingers on his shoulder all worked at unraveling his control. How could one woman affect him so greatly?

“Since you are a musician at heart, once you feel the melody in your bones, it will only help you in a dance.” He put his head closer to hers. “And you play marvelously. I can’t wait to hear you sing soon.”

“Thank you. I adore playing the piano as well as singing, had hoped I could make it to the stage and share those gifts with the world, but my mother was scandalized by that prospect, so the dream died.”

“You should keep that always in your heart, for if you still think of such, that dream is not done with you.” That was how he felt about opening the counting house.

Around and around the cleared section of flooring they went. Eventually, the fact that the music had stopped penetrated his muddled brain, and when he glanced in Jane’s direction, he frowned for she’d left the room. “Where did my daughter go?”

Felicity peered in that direction as well. “I would have no idea. Perhaps she grew weary of playing.”

Or she took exception to watching him with Felicity. Slowly, their movements in the dance ceased. She stared up at him and he gazed down at her without the need for talking.

“Thank you for the dance,” she whispered after a few moments. “I heartily enjoyed myself, for it’s been an age since anyone wished to dance with me.”

“Then all of those men who didn’t want to take a chance or even come to know you are idiots.” Yet he didn’t want this time with her to end. Watching her the whole time, Hugh slipped a hand to her nape and with his other hand still resting at the small of her back, he drew her closer then claimed her lips.

And he spiraled down, down, down a slippery slope that was as familiar to him as his own name, and as comforting as drinking hot tea.

Seconds later, he pulled slightly away, seeking, asking, assessing. If she hadn’t looked at him with the same hunger in her expressive eyes that was currently coursing through his blood, if her fingers hadn’t curled into the lapel of his superfine jacket, if the tip of her tongue hadn’t darted out to moisten her bottom lip, he could have walked out of the room without consequence. He could have invited her to share tea with him, no harm done, but all those things *had* happened, and he was lost.

Continuing his slide into both the known and unknown.

“Damn.” With a groan, Hugh wrapped her more securely in his arms and crushed his lips to hers with hunger guiding his movements. He wanted much more from her than he could articulate with words, but she tasted so sweet, felt so warm and right, that he couldn’t have enough. When he encouraged her lips to part, she followed his lead, and he took full advantage. The second his tongue slid against hers, another portion of his control shattered.

A soft sound of acceptance at the back of her throat nearly drove him insane, and apparently feeling the same desire as he, Felicity kissed him back with enthusiasm. Satin slid over steel as they dueled for control, but when she surrendered to him with a tiny sigh, layered her body against his in an effort to be closer, need shivered down his spine. She looped her arms about his shoulders, and the second her fingers caressed his nape, commonsense fled.

“I want you so much,” he whispered against her lips before returning to devouring her mouth. Guided by instinct, Hugh lifted her off the floor, shuttled her over the carpeting, and when he reached a sofa that had been shoved to the side with a bolstered end, he deposited her rear end onto that cushion.

The pounding of his pulse in his ears kept time to the insistent throb of his shaft as he dragged his lips along the silky column of her neck. That faint scent of lilacs was intoxicating. It spurred him onward, beckoned him closer until he held her head in his palms and moved between her naturally splayed legs, kissing her as if it were his only purpose in life.

“Hugh, I...” She didn’t finish the sentence, and neither did he want her to. A tiny moan escaped her as she fumbled with his cravat. The second she had the knot somewhat loosened, she tugged him closer, put her lips to his skin she’d just uncovered on his neck.

Bloody hell! Need slammed into him; he was nearly drunk on her, and the fact she apparently forgot her prickles and reticence toward men when she was with him fanned the flames in his blood. Needing so much more, he pressed feather weighted kisses to the underside of her jaw while working the

laces at the back of her dress. He didn't care that the doors to the room were open or that anyone could come upon them. The whole of his attention was on her. The soft wool was lovely against his fingers, and when the bodice of the garment gaped open, he tugged it as well as the fabric beneath downward until the tops of her full breasts were exposed. Another yank revealed one hardened pink nipple, and lust surged through his erect shaft.

“Beautiful,” he whispered, and damn if his hands didn't shake slightly when he cupped her breasts, flicked the tip of his tongue over that pebbled tip. “I can't have enough.”

What the devil is wrong with me?

“Touch me, Hugh.” The admirable woman pressed a hand over his, guiding his fingers to the nipple, granting him all the permission he wanted.

“Gladly.” As he kissed her again, he worried that hardened tip with the pad of his thumb. A tiny whimper left her throat and she squirmed, so he caressed her breast before rolling the nipple. Each nip, nibble, or suckle he gave, the more he wanted to continue exploring the rest of her body. Where was the harm in ravishing her right here? She plucked at his sleeves, his waistcoat, fumbled with the buttons of his jacket and shoved it a bit from his shoulders.

“Hugh...”

Desire clouded his mind; hunger drove his actions. He urged her slightly backward to slip a hand beneath her skirting. “So soft.” The silky skin of her thighs nearly sent him over the edge. “Tell me you want me, Lissie.” Quickly, before he was completely done in by the sensations coursing through his body and hardening his shaft, he slowed his actions lest he flip her over and toss her skirts over her head. She deserved better treatment than a quick toss.

In the end, it wasn't to be, for the sound of his daughter's voice penetrated the haze of passion in his brain.

“Papa? I'm ordering tea to the upstairs parlor. Will you join me?”

Thank goodness her voice sounded farther down the corridor that she hadn't arrived in the room yet. Quickly, he pulled away from Felicity and then helped her gain her footing while she righted her clothing.

"Yes, I would like that above all things," he called back with a rueful glance at Felicity. "Miss Hixton will join me."

"I shall let the footman know," Jane said in response, then the sound of her retreating footsteps echoed.

"Perhaps you should go up ahead of me," he said to Felicity, for damn if he wasn't sporting an impressive cockstand. "I, uh, need a few moments to myself."

The surprise in her eyes changed to interest as she quickly drew her gaze down his body and back up again. "Perhaps you're right." She tucked an escaped strand of hair into the bun at the back of her head, but the blush in her cheeks continued to send fire into his blood. "Let us hope your daughter wasn't witness to... that."

"If she did, there is nothing we can do about it now." What he needed was to go outside and stand in the frigid winter air in the hopes of cooling down.

"Don't make a habit of forgetting your head when your daughter is about," Felicity said with a wink.

"I shall try." However, life would be better if Jane hadn't born witness to his father being caught up in desire for the woman he would marry, for he wasn't in the mood to field questions. Although, it might prove healthy for her to have a good foundation of what a marriage should be based upon. "Go ahead. I'll be there directly."

"Don't dawdle. It sounded as if Jane wished for your presence immediately."

"Indeed." He frowned for long moments after she'd left the room, for there was no doubt in his mind; he recognized the symptoms, and oddly enough, it was freeing to finally have confirmation.

I am falling in love with Felicity Hixton.

Chapter Twelve



February 14, 1818

Merciful heavens, I'm not sure I can do this, not certain I want to do this!

It was the night of the Valentine's Day ball Hugh's parents threw every year, and he'd told her that he suspected they would use this event to announce his engagement to her as a way to solidify it in front of the *ton* so neither of them would back out without serious repercussions.

Yet Felicity's nerves crawled with anxiety and knots of worry had formed in the pit of her belly. The last thing she wanted was to be in society again, for the last time that had happened was the rout that had resulted in her forced engagement.

To a man who made her increasingly confused.

With one last peek into the cheval glass in her room, she sighed and smoothed her hands down the front of her gown, the one she and Jane had found at the girl's favorite modiste's shop. Truly, it was a lovely dress, but did she have enough confidence to wear it?

"Oh, dear." Made of red velvet with a scooped neckline that came down far too low in her opinion, the gown showed her bosom quite well then fell from a high waist. A wide silver satin ribbon emphasized her waist and had been tied in a pretty bow at the small of her back. Silver embroidery scrolled around the bodice and the bottom hem. The garment was completed with short, puffed sleeves, opera-length gloves in ivory kid, and silver satin slippers. "Surely, this can't be me."

The longer she stared, the more healthy color appeared in her pale cheeks. A maid had dressed her hair in a fancy upswept style and had threaded a silver ribbon through the tresses. Two days ago, Jane had lent her a comb set with tiny sparkling rubies for the occasion. Suddenly, she didn't know herself any longer. Who was this woman who looked healthy, happy, and content? Where had the woman gone who hated men, romance, and everything else? The woman who wished to hide herself away from society and the world?

Honestly, she was still there, but over the course of knowing Hugh and acclimating to the fact her life was moving in an entirely different direction, she was more inclined to feel hope for the future instead of dreading it. Perhaps being with a man wasn't as bad as she'd once thought, and those thoughts had solidified the afternoon she'd danced with him.

Everything had changed since that day.

“Miss Hixton?”

The sound of Jane's voice wrenched Felicity from her musings. She glanced away from the cheval glass to the girl, who wore a lovely gown of pink taffeta with a netting overskirt and a girlish flounce at the hem. Her blonde-brown hair had been set in fat curls that cascaded down her back and held away from her face with tortoiseshell combs. Truly, she was gorgeous, and she would break hearts once she was introduced formally to society.

“Yes?”

“I would like to talk with you before we go down to the carriage.” Her expression was far too sober for a girl about to attend—somewhat—her first society function.

“All right.” She gestured the girl in. “Is all well?”

“Um...” Jane picked at the fit of her gloves. “I honestly don't believe so.”

“What happened?” When she went to touch the girl's arm, Jane wrenched away. “Papa and I were making good inroads to repairing our relationship. I thought I finally had him back, but then he decided to spend most of the time that

he's home with you." She popped her hands on her hips and glared at Felicity. "How dare you, Miss Hixton! You have taken his time and attention away from me, and he's calling it courtship."

For a moment, she was stunned into silence, for what could she say? It was true that Hugh had adopted the habit of drifting close and tracking her down throughout the house, and more than a few times, he'd brought her fancy French chocolates in elaborate boxes, hothouse flowers wrapped in pretty paper, and once he'd given her a porcelain figure of a swan. Ninny that she was, Felicity looked forward to being around him, from the snatches of conversation they shared during uninterrupted time, to the discussions about authors and poets.

"It hasn't been intentional on my part. Your father simply wants us to come to know each other better during the engagement period; he is aware of the fact that I don't wish to wed a stranger." She frowned. "I never wanted to steal his time from you." Perhaps she should beg off from this evening's festivities. In that way, Hugh could escort his daughter and they could spend the bulk of the ball with his family. "I... I have never been around children for any length of time."

"I am *not* a child."

"That was a poor choice of words. I have never been put into a position of needing to be seen as a mothering figure." She held up a hand to ward off the inevitable protest. "Not that I would ever dream of replacing your mother."

"Yet it's happening!" Tears welled in Jane's eyes. "He has ignored me for five years, and the moment I get him back, his attention is divided. My father hums to himself now whereas before, he was as lonely and sad as I still am." The girl stormed across the room to stand in front of the cheval glass. "It's not fair. Especially since when we met, you were such a sour puss full of prickles. That was all to the good because there wasn't a chance he could have been taken beneath your spell."

“I completely agree, though I must debate the fact that I’m charming enough to enchant any man.” The concept was almost laughable.

Jane snorted. She met Felicity’s gaze in the cheval glass. “That is such a bammer, Miss Hixton. Look at you! That gown is amazing on your frame and the color suits your complexion so well, just as I knew it would.”

At least it was a compliment. “You did a wonderful job telling the modiste how to alter it. I am horrible at things like that. And your dress is amazing too. I’m in awe of your talent.” When Jane didn’t respond, Felicity blew out a breath. “People grow and change, dear, especially when they are in close proximity to each other. Your father is working hard to convince me this engagement is a good idea... and honestly? I’d like to waver. He seems a good sort.”

“Papa is one of the loveliest men in the world,” the girl conceded with a sigh. “I feel as if I haven’t had nearly enough time with him, and all too soon I’ll have to go away to finishing school, and he’ll forget all about me again.” The threat of tears was imminent in her voice.

“That is understandable, but that won’t happen. He is making a concentrated effort and I believe he’s reassessed his priorities.” What else could she say that would mollify the girl? Felicity clasped her hands together in an effort to quell their shaking. “If you want me to, I’ll warn him away from me, find my prickles, and make certain he loses interest.”

The thought of tossing away his friendship and his stolen kisses tightened her chest. A wad of unshed tears lodged in her throat.

“As much as I want to agree to that, I can’t. Papa has been so much happier since you came to stay with us.” A few tears slipped to Jane’s cheeks. “This whole conversation hasn’t been well done of me, but I *am* a bit fearful.”

“I am as well. Though we are supposed to change in this life, the very concept of that is terrifying at times.”

“Yes.” The girl nodded. She turned about and regarded Felicity. “Perhaps I’m out of sorts due to my friends.” There was a lostness about her that spoke to her young age.

“Why would you say that? Did something happen in recent days?”

“I saw them a few days ago at the shops. When you and I were hunting for gloves and fans.” Jane shook her head. “A couple of them teased me. Told me that once Papa marries you, he’ll want a new family, have children that will replace me.”

“Oh, dear.” So that was the crux of the emotions and why she’d lashed out. “I’m sorry to hear that, but you must know that isn’t true.” Heat gathered in Felicity’s cheeks at the thought, though. She and Hugh had already come together intimately. Would the coupling result in a child? “Even if I do marry your father, you are his firstborn child. He loves you, and no one can replace you.”

“Ha.” The girl huffed in frustration. “What if you bear him a son? Isn’t that what every man wants? Girls aren’t valuable, and we both know it, Miss Hixton.”

What could she say in the face of bald facts? “Our society is skewed.” Daring much, Felicity closed the distance between them and grabbed one of Jane’s hands. “You have to learn not to give credence or strength to the noise, for that will weaken the beliefs in your own self.”

At least she hoped. Perhaps she should follow her own advice.

“I don’t know.” Jane shook her head. When she tried to pull her gloved hand away, Felicity held on tighter. “They also said since I am not what the *ton* considers proper, Papa will probably send me away after finishing school, then send me to my grandfather’s country estate.” Tears riddled her voice again. “And if that didn’t happen, I should just go into a convent and become a nun because no man would ever want me.”

“Why the devil would anyone tell you that?” Shock propelled the words from her throat.

Moisture welled in the girl’s eyes. “Because my fingers are always smudged with charcoal, and they think I’m odd due to my sketches.”

“Oh, sweeting, please don’t listen to those girls.” With her own eyes tearing, Felicity hugged Jane. For a few seconds, the young lady went stiff but then she slowly collapsed in Felicity’s arms and clung tight. “Perhaps jealousy has made them say those horrid things, but they aren’t truly friends. I was teased when I was your age too, and I know how much it can hurt.”

“I have never wished to fit in with girls like that; they lead such boring lives, but I also don’t want to disappoint Papa if I can’t do what is expected of me.” The tearful confidence coupled with how she held onto Felicity if they would both be torn from each other tugged at her heart.

“Your papa is exceedingly proud of you right now. Hasn’t he told you so?”

“Yes, but people lie, especially if we’re not adults.”

“Well, yes, this is true, and it is also true that men lie to manipulate others.” *Oh, dear.* Perhaps she’d impressed the wrong things upon the girl in her short time under this roof. “However, your father is not one of them. He wouldn’t say words if they weren’t true, and if he didn’t believe something about you, he’d tell you that too.”

Jane pulled away. “It is difficult to know what is right when he practically abandoned me for five years.”

“But he isn’t absent now. He has made strides into being the father you need.” Of this she believed with her whole heart. “He is trying, Jane. Give him grace and take some for yourself.” She bit her bottom lip. “Life is hard enough without berating yourself for everything you are not instead of celebrating what you are.”

Again, advice she needed to heed for herself.

“I think you might be right.” The girl wiped her eyes and cheeks. “Everything is changing in my life. I don’t know how I feel about that.”

“It’s understandable, for I feel much the same way. One moment it’s terrifying but the next, it’s exhilarating, and through it all, you remain anxious because everything can still go horribly wrong.”

“Yes!”

Felicity offered a tentative smile. “The best we can do is muddle through and hope our thoughts will clear, but I *can* tell you this.” She tucked a few strands of hair behind Jane’s ear. “Ignore the vipers and follow your own path. At least you’ll be happy where they won’t. And in my own experience—small though it is—the best of men don’t enjoy perfect women who follow the rules. Never let anyone tell you otherwise.”

Please let that be true.

For the space of a few heartbeats, Jane regarded her with speculation. Finally, she nodded. “Thank you, Miss Hixton. I’m glad you are here. It makes my mess seem less... all-encompassing.”

“I’m here if you should have need of me, and I’ve always been a good listener.” Despite her wishes to hide and protect her heart, the longer she was in this household and around the people beneath this roof, the more open she became. She wasn’t the only one trying to pretend she wasn’t a mess inside, and perhaps showing the world who she truly was would help others. “On that note, we should probably go downstairs. Too much more of this and I’ll both be wearing tear-stained gowns.”

“Papa will be wondering where we are,” Jane said as she scrubbed at her cheeks then pinched them for some color.

A knock on her door interrupted the conversation. “You are no doubt correct.”

Blowing out a breath, Felicity opened the door. The butler stood in the corridor beyond. “Yes?”

“Mr. Ridgeway is waiting in the carriage. He told me to inform you that time is growing late and that he doesn’t wish to have his mother ring a peal over his head.” He delivered the lines with a slight grin. “It would be best if you’d go downstairs. I have a footman gathering your cloaks. It is quite cold outside.”

Yes, the temperatures had declined rapidly within the last week. It was almost as if her very bones shivered each time she needed to go from the house for errands. “We are on the way. Thank you.” She glanced at Jane. “It sounds as if your father is without patience this evening.”

The girl snorted. “Grandmother is very demanding when it comes to the social events she hosts.”



Tottenham House

St. James Place, Mayfair

London

Since she had been clad in a cloak and Hugh had a greatcoat over his attire, their clothing for the ball remained hidden while in the closed carriage.

During the trip across Mayfair, he and Jane had carried on a conversation about deportment and behavior, to whom she could talk and to whom she couldn’t, and by no means was she to go unattended anywhere.

Jane had agreed readily enough, but there’d been a surly tilt to her lips and shadows in her eyes Felicity didn’t quite trust. Perhaps she was still upset regarding what her friends had said or perhaps she was anxious about the ball. Whatever it was, Felicity hoped all would be well.

By the time they arrived in the ballroom after the receiving line where she met with his parents once more, a huge crush had formed. The countess indicated they would announce Hugh's engagement to Felicity around the midpoint of the ball. Since then, knots of worry had formed in her belly and hadn't let up. There was a crush of people in the ballroom, and already the volume of noise from conversations and laughter was intense.

Candlelight sparkled from sconces and an impressive crystal chandelier hanging in the middle of the ceiling. Cutout hearts made of red, pink, and gold paper festooned the windows as well as the doorways. In every corner of the room, large Grecian-inspired vases had been filled with hothouse blooms, and their fragrance worked to cover other scents lingering through the air. A string quartet was assembling off to one side of the room, partially hidden by potted palms and ferns.

"Goodness, this looks to be quite the affair," she whispered to Hugh when they stopped near the closed doors that led to the rear gardens behind the house.

"Oh, my parents adore entertaining so there should be quite the guest list." He glanced at Jane. "Your grandmother has just arrived at the room and she's gesturing to you. Best find out why you are being summoned."

Jane shook her head with a grin. "No doubt she wishes me to fetch her a shawl or something... or demand to know why I'm here to begin with."

"Stiff upper lip, my girl," he said in response.

Felicity briefly pointed her gaze to the frescoed ceiling. "Be polite. If that is true, tell her you are gaining experience so you will be more advanced in finishing school."

"I will." With a wave, Jane darted off and was soon lost amidst the milling crowds.

"Perhaps bringing her wasn't a good idea," Felicity fretted, for she remained worried after what Jane had admitted to her at the house.

“Nonsense. She’ll be fine. Mother no doubt wishes for gossip... or to hear how you and I interact with each other.” He shrugged. “I can’t stop either instance.”

“No.” At least he provided a distraction. The scent of him teased her nose, but it was his standard evening clothing that captured her attention. The tailcoat highlighted his lean frame, and he’d worn a red satin waistcoat swirled with golden thread for the occasion. Tonight, he’d put a trace of pomade into his dark brown hair to keep it parted to one side of his head, but honestly, she didn’t care for such a strict look. He was more handsome without it.

“Why do you stare at me like that?” Mischief and amusement danced in his eyes.

“How am I staring at you?” Good heavens, why was it so hot in the room? She resisted the urge to snap open her fan to put air on her cheeks.

He bent his head closer to hers. “As if you wish to eat me up... or at the very least spirit me off to an empty room. It’s a shame it’s too cold to go outside.”

“Oh!” Why couldn’t she learn to mask her emotions? “I... Well, I...” When he grinned, she couldn’t help but do the same. “It’s just you are so handsome in your evening clothing, and you smell so lovely,” as she spoke, her gaze drifted to his mouth, “and if I’m honest, I wouldn’t mind if you tried to steal a kiss.”

His chuckle reverberated inside her chest and sent flutters through her lower belly. “I adore that you’ve shed your cloak of prickles enough you can admit such a thing, but for the moment since we’re not alone, you’ll have to settle for a set.”

Was she truly smiling at him as if she would flirt with him if given the chance? What was happening to her? “It is a start. Did you think I would have worn this gown if I didn’t want to show it off?” The feeling of falling assailed her, and since that confused her, she ignored it.

Chapter Thirteen



Hugh had the distinct thought he had no idea what had happened to his life, but it all somehow had revitalized when Felicity had come into it.

“The gown is spectacular.” There was something about the richness of red velvet that spoke of luxury and wealth, and in such a fabric, his fiancée was beautiful. He swept his gaze along the low neckline, wished he had the liberty and privacy of placing kisses all over that lush décolletage. “However, you are much more beautiful than the garment.” It was the truth, and he hadn’t properly appreciated that fact before.

“Do stop.” She playfully tapped his chest with the end of her closed fan. “It is merely a gown.”

“That my daughter designed, and when you both collaborate, I’m left breathless.” How had he been so fortunate to have such women in his life? “Incidentally, you should wear red more often. It is quite striking and will gain you notice.”

“I don’t need such.” Confusion reflected in her eyes. “As it is, being here tonight has put me out of my element, and I’m not certain I’m comfortable.”

He took one of her hands. “Would you be more so in front of a piano?”

“I don’t see how that is relevant to this moment.”

“It is nothing to request one be wheeled in. Perhaps you could play a song with the accompaniment of the strings my father has retained, even sing. Your voice is delightful, and this would be a good time to share that gift with society.” The more he spoke of it, the more his excitement built. If he could give her this opportunity, perhaps she would come to trust him

by increments, even over and above what she did already. “Just say the word.”

“Oh, Hugh.” Longing lined her face for an instant. “As lovely as that might be, I’m not certain your parents would enjoy me usurping their ball.”

“Ha.” He shook his head. “My parents can hang for all I care. You are my first priority now. Jane as well.” In fact, where the devil had his daughter run off to? When he glanced about the crowded room, at the couples just completing a country reel, he could find no trace of her.

Before Felicity could respond, his parents moved to the top of the room, whereupon his father rang a brass handbell, presumably to gain everyone’s attention. Once that happened, he gave the bell to a footman and then smiled at the company.

“Thank you for coming tonight. As you know, my lovely wife and I were married around this time forty years ago, which is why we mark this day with a ball every year.” He beamed, first at the guests and then at Hugh’s mother, who tittered and blushed as if she were a girl of eighteen just making her Come Out. His heart constricted, for he’d always wished for a marriage like his parents, and he’d had that with Amelia, but fate had decreed it wouldn’t last. “Now the day is even more special, for I have a special announcement.”

Damn and blast. So Father wasn’t lying when he’d threatened to do it.

Hugh glanced at Felicity, who looked on with an expression of dread and embarrassment. *Poor thing.* He touched her gloved hand. “It will be right as rain soon enough.”

His father continued. “It is my great pleasure to inform everyone that my youngest son, Hugh, is once more engaged to be married, to the lovely Miss Hixton.” As a spattering of applause and murmurs cycled through the room, and far too many pairs of eyes rested upon him, Hugh’s father continued. “No wedding date has been set, but the countess and I couldn’t be happier for this development.”

For the next few moments, a surge of well-wishers congregated around him and Felicity. There was no escape; they were forced to endure the felicitations. When his father called for a waltz, the knot around them finally broke.

“That was wildly embarrassing,” he murmured with a wry grin.

Felicity snorted with apparent amusement. Then she hiccupped, and her cheeks turned red. “You have no idea just how much.”

He was coming to adore that sound. The last time he’d heard it was the night he’d claimed her body in the library, and he’d rather missed it. “Would you feel more comfortable if I escorted you out of the ballroom?”

“I would, but you should at least dance with your mother and your sister-in-law.”

“Why?” Hugh reared backward as shock plowed through him.

“Everyone is happy your roguish ways have been curbed with this engagement. Go be a gentleman with them; they are as pleased as peacocks about tonight.” She gave him a little shove. “Go on. I’ll find something to occupy myself, or perhaps I’ll wrangle Jane and discover how the evening is going for her.”

“You could do that, of course.” Why was she so afraid to be alone with him? For that matter, why hadn’t she yet come ‘round to the idea this engagement was all too real? Perhaps he needed to try harder at his courtship. Then he shoved away the annoyance brewing in his chest. “My older brother is taking Mother out onto the floor as we speak.” God, but Jeffrey would have enjoyed teasing him over the events of the last couple of weeks, to say nothing about this night. “As for my sister-in-law? She must be increasing again, for she looks rather green about the gills and is using that wall to prop herself up.” Which would make that her third child; his brother didn’t have issues reproducing.

“Why do you seem so very sad at the thought?” Instead of trying to remove her hand from his, Felicity squeezed his fingers. “What haven’t you told me?”

“Much, I’m afraid, choosing to keep some of my past from you. It doesn’t reflect well on me.” Hugh blew out a breath when she kept staring at him. “My middle brother Jeffrey died just over a year ago. I miss him, miss his teasing. He always said I’d be the least likely of all of us to marry, and he made jest when I fell in love with Amelia.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” she murmured, and the answering emotion reflected in her eyes tugged at his heart. “I lost a brother, too, but he was still a child when it happened.”

“Thank you. And I give the same consideration to you.” After clearing his throat, he nodded. “He was often one of my best friends. I think he would have liked you.”

“I don’t see how. I’m hardly the beautiful, society lady you’ve been used to.”

“Much more talk like that, and I’ll be forced to show you why you are wrong, for as long as it takes.” Perhaps he still would. Taking her to a secluded room and kissing her senseless sounded like a good idea. As more couples filled the dance floor, he tugged her toward an open space. “I don’t wish to talk about maudlin things.” Tonight was to celebrate their engagement. It mattered not how it had come about. It was all too real now, and he wished for every man in attendance to know that Felicity belonged to him, and that he was thrilled to marry her if he could only convince her. His chest swelled with pride as they assumed the opening position. “Dance this waltz with me.” It wasn’t a question.

Surprise and a trace of fear shadowed her face. “We danced the other day. You should—”

“No more excuses. I want to dance with my fiancée.”

“Yes, but—”

“It’s the only sensible action since our engagement has been publicly announced.” He winked. “We *will* be married at some point.”

The knowledge of which had the power to turn his world upside down, and he rather liked it. A lifetime of arguing and convincing Felicity they would be a good match, even when they were old and gray? He did love a challenge.

The blush in her cheeks deepened. “It was only supposed to last as long as it took for the gossip to die. Except now that your father has told everyone...” A bit of fear jumped into her eyes. “You’re completely mad to think this engagement has a chance to survive into the future.”

“There are worse things.” As he remembered his brother and the fact that life was far too short to waste it, Hugh grinned. “I won’t change my mind, so I would advise you to shed the remainder of your prickles and realize you will soon be the wife of the grandson of an earl.”

“I am not equal to this endeavor,” she said in a barely there whisper he almost missed. Panic shadowed her eyes, but he tightened his fingers on hers. “There is every possibility I’ll make a fool of you or myself.”

“My mind is firm, Lissie. And you won’t. Any woman who can sing and play the piano with your confidence can transfer those skills to being married.” Wanting to delve deeper into the mystery of her and why she was still discomfited about marriage after he’d tried to show her he was earnest, he held her gaze. “In this moment, there is only you and me. Don’t think of anything beyond that. Worry will wait for the morrow, and when it comes, I’ll be there. At your side. I will *not* leave you.”

It felt entirely too right to promise that. She needed him, and in many ways, he realized he needed her too. Hell, he was seconds away from tossing his hat over the windmill for her, and after all was said and done, he looked forward to being a husband again.

When the first notes of the waltz burst upon the air, Hugh guided her steps, grinning when she followed him like she’d done the day they’d demonstrated the set for Jane. All too soon they moved as fluidly as if they’d been dancing together all their lives.

Everything around them fell away. No longer was he aware of the other dancers or the guests who watched with interest, jealousy, or speculation from the sides of the room. There was only the woman in his arms. The touch of her fingers on his during the more intricate steps of the dance left him gasping for more. A faint scent of lilacs swirled to his nose, and he couldn't wait to help her out of that gown and explore her skin. The heat of her against him drove him closer to the edge of madness. She might not believe they were a good match or that this engagement was exactly what they both needed, but he did. There were no more doubts. Lissie's smile contained secrets and promises he couldn't wait to puzzle out.

“Ah, Felicity, it's as if we've known each other forever.”

There was a lifetime ahead of them. The last time he'd felt both reckless and secure was when he'd married Amelia and began their life together. Perhaps it was his unique trait that he fell first, but he didn't care. Lissie was marvelous, and when she completely shed her skittishness and mistrust, there would be no stopping her. She wasn't completely of the *ton*, but that mattered not, for she and Jane were forging a relationship, and under Felicity's tutelage, his daughter would flourish.

The sensation of tumbling tip over tail assailed him, and he welcomed the fall, and what was more, he didn't mind as much as he had when the engagement was forced.

Damn and blast, I really do need a woman at my side.

“I think you are quite daft,” she whispered, and the dulcet tones of her voice yanked him out of his thoughts. “You are woolgathering.”

“Perhaps I am. Merely thinking about the future.” At a turn in the dance, he drew her closer. “But if you wish to converse, I would be happy to do that instead.”

“No need. This is rather pleasant, this being in your arms, having you all to myself.” Remarkably, there was a hint

of teasing in her tones, and for the moment, that superseded her usual worry.

Ah, she was a delightful mix of contrasts. Hugh leaned close enough to put his lips to the shell of her ear. “You can have me alone in a very different way. Just say the word.” He couldn’t help a grin. “Truth be told, I’ve wanted that since we came together in the library the other night.”

“Oh.” Almost imperceptibly, she squeezed her fingers on his shoulder, releasing him at the next turn. “I... I would be lying if I said I didn’t think about that night as well.”

Hot desire coursed down his spine to lodge in his shaft. “It would be easy to abscond...”

“Stop. We are the guests of honor. We can’t leave else your parents will want to know why,” Felicity whispered as the set came to an end. A frown turned down her highly kissable lips. She tilted her head to one side. “You look ready to devour me.” There was no mistaking the breathless quality to her words or the answering hunger in her dark eyes. “Or that is what it seems like to me.”

How adorable was she? “Is that such a bad thing?” Would that they’d remain in this timeless bubble where worries couldn’t have at them, and reality didn’t intrude.

“I don’t suppose it is,” she finally answered in a barely audible voice, but the blatant invitation in her eyes nearly had him throwing her over his shoulder and carrying her off to a guest bedroom. Then she shook her head, and her expression retained a bit of worry once more. “I should check on Jane.”

“I’ll do that. You enjoy yourself.” He gestured across the room. “Perhaps I can convince my father to dance with you.”

Panic lined her face. “Please don’t.”

“It’ll be good for you.” When he turned his head, he caught his daughter’s gaze, and she pointed hers to the ceiling. “Go, Lissie. I need to speak with Jane. She seems ill-at-ease and needs me.” And he didn’t want to disappoint her again.

Resignation shadowed her face. “Very well.” With a wave, she started across the ballroom.

Seconds later, he joined his daughter, escorted her to the side of the room and out of foot traffic. “How are you enjoying your first ball?”

She shrugged. “It isn’t quite the event I’d thought it was, and truth be known, I would rather be home working on my sketches.”

“Speaking of that, your gown and Felicity’s are simply wonderful.” He laid a hand on her shoulder. “I am proud of you and all you are working toward.”

“I never knew how enjoyable it was to see what I’d designed in real life on a living person instead of the wooden form I fashioned.” A tremulous smile curved her lips. “Do I really need to attend finishing school?”

“You do, for other reasons. Young ladies need to learn far more than how to pursue whatever sets their soul on fire.” He patted her cheek. “There is much potential in the offing for you—for all of us—and I’ll help you in any way that I can.”

“All of us?” When she looked onto the dance floor where a country reel was in progress, she frowned. “Do you love Miss Hixton, Papa?”

“I believe I am certainly moving in that direction.”

The frown intensified. “Do you love her more than you loved Mama?”

Dear God. How to answer that question? “There is no more or less. I will never forget your mama; she lives deep in my heart and will always be there. But the love I have for Felicity is different. She makes me feel alive again, where I haven’t for a very long time.” Though he hadn’t analyzed that for himself, another wave of shock went through him to know it wasn’t a falsehood. “She makes me believe hope still exists in this world and that I am not alone in it.” For the moment, he ignored the music and the dancers as well as the people standing on the sidelines talking. “I *am* going to marry her. How do you feel about that?”

“My feelings change day to day. Sometimes, it’s confusing.” She crossed her arms at her chest and gave him a frown. “While I know no one can replace Mama and no one should, and I know you would be happier if you had a wife again, I wonder if you will still have time for me.” When her chin trembled, Hugh’s heart went out to her. “We have only just reconnected, Papa. I don’t want to lose you again, especially when I go away to school.”

“Ah, sweeting, I promise that won’t happen.” Despite shows of emotion not being done in public, he pulled his daughter into his arms and hugged her, held her close, then kissed the top of her head. “Growth is good for everyone. Even you.”

“Perhaps.” Jane pulled away. “I saw you kissing her the other day when you were supposed to be demonstrating a waltz for me.”

Heat went up the back of his neck. “Oh?” What else did she witness?

“I left once it seemed you would be carried away.” She shrugged. “Gave you privacy, but why are you always warning *me* about scandal when *you* were nearly diving into it yourself?”

There were no words to explain. He’d been well and truly caught. “Sometimes I believe you are too clever for your own good.”

Her grin was this side of cheeky. “But aren’t spirited ladies the best sort?”

“They are.” Suddenly, his concern for her and the years ahead rose exponentially. Would a father’s worry over a daughter ever fade, regardless of how old she was? “We will talk about that later. Please be kind to Felicity. She truly is a marvelous person, and once we both manage to fight our way through her thorns, we will finally have a chance to be happy again, as a family.” Tightness went through his chest. “Don’t we deserve that?”

As she met his gaze, her eyes welled with tears. “That would be lovely and make everything else less terrible.”

“What is bothering you? Tell me and I will fix it.” How had he not known of his daughter’s troubles? Felicity hadn’t said anything either.

“It isn’t your concern, Papa. I can fight my own battles.” Her chin inclined a fraction as she waved away his interest. “In the meanwhile, perhaps you should partner me in the next reel forming.”

“Why is that?”

She grinned. “Miss Hixton is currently being led out by Baron Dashfield.”

“What?” Quickly, he glanced toward the ballroom and searched until he located her. Sure enough, his damned best friend was preparing to partner her. Sharp stabs of jealousy went through his chest. “I didn’t give him permission.”

Jane snorted. “She isn’t a possession to be owned.”

“I know that.” Willing himself to be calm, he once more beheld his daughter. “Come, then. This will be your first dance, but the only other men you go out with are your grandfather or uncle.”

“So many rules. Do you not trust me?”

“Oh, I trust you. It’s men I don’t trust.” In that, he was of the same mindset as Felicity. He took her hand and then guided her onto the floor and into an open spot. “I’m trying to protect you.”

“And Miss Hixton?”

“Of course.”

“She is quite fortunate, and I’m being a ninny if I don’t welcome her with open arms,” she said as the first notes erupted into the air as the set began. “You have my blessing.”

“Thank you.” He placed a hand over his heart. “I don’t take that decision lightly.” All the pieces of the puzzle surrounding what could have been a great debacle at the first

of the month were now sliding into place to make a clear picture, and he couldn't wait to embrace it. As he performed the first steps with his daughter, his chest tightened. "I fully believe you and I are coming out of the darkness we'd tumbled into. Nothing but good days from here."

If fate were kind, it would be so.

Chapter Fourteen



February 15, 1818

Tulip Place

No. 2 Chapel Street, Grosvenor Square

London

The longcase clock on the second level struck the noon hour. Felicity yawned as she glanced out the window in the morning room where she was attending to correspondence.

They'd gotten in last night near two in the morning following the ball, and though she had only risen from her bed two hours ago, sleep clung persistently. Hugh was attending a business meeting with Baron Dashfield that he should return from at any moment, and Jane promised she would sit with Felicity to further her skills at the piano in about an hour.

No time to nap.

Time passed as she lost herself in writing letters. It wasn't until the longcase clock struck the next hour that she realized Jane hadn't sought her out. With a frown, Felicity put away her pen, inkwell, and stationery and then went in search of the girl.

When Jane wasn't found in her usual spots in her bedroom, Hugh's study, or the library, she still wasn't concerned, for sometimes Jane went a few doors down to spend time with a girl of her own age who lived there.

As she came back downstairs, she passed the butler on the stairs. "Mr. Bolson, have you seen Miss Ridgeway? She was supposed to have a piano lesson with me, but she has missed it."

“I haven’t seen her since breakfast this morning, Miss Hixton. Shall I ask the upstairs maid if she has seen her?”

“That is a good idea. Please keep me informed.” Knots of worry pulled in her belly. “Has Mr. Ridgeway returned home?”

“I believe he is in his rooms as of twenty minutes ago. Shall I tell him you wish for his company?”

She ignored the heat in her cheeks. “No, thank you. I’ll knock on his door to discuss his daughter’s whereabouts.” Perhaps it wasn’t well done of her to do that, but the concern for Jane outweighed the scandal. “And if you locate Miss Ridgeway, let me know.”

“Of course, Miss Hixton.”

Then she continued up the stairs to the third floor. By the time she’d traversed the corridor and paused before Hugh’s door, her heart beat so quickly the organ probably assumed she’d run all the way from France. Chiding herself for a ninny, Felicity raised a hand, knocked on the wooden panel, and silently worried until it swung inward, except it didn’t appear to have been fully closed.

“Hugh?” After pushing the door open all the way, she entered his dressing room, only to find the space devoid of occupation. The room was tidy, and the furniture made of heavy, dark-stained walnut wood. A door to the adjoining bedroom was open, and when she went to peek into his inner sanctum, he wasn’t there either. The furniture and bedframe were made of matching wood. Dark maroon drapes hung at the windows, the counterpane held maroon and navy colors that were echoed in the Oriental-style carpeting on the floor. “Hugh?”

“Miss Hixton, where the hell are you?” Hugh’s bellow caused her to jump.

“Hugh?” Why did he sound so angry? She hurried into the dressing room and then to the corridor door. Peering down the hall, she spied him bolting from his daughter’s room. A rush of relief moved through her chest. Everything wasn’t so

bad when she was in his company. “What are you doing? I was just looking for you.” When she would have closed the distance, the look in his eyes kept her rooted to the spot.

He held up a small, leatherbound journal as he stormed along the corridor toward her. “I went in search of Jane but have been unable to find her.”

“I was doing the same, so I thought to seek you out and ask. I thought perhaps she might have been with you.”

“She wasn’t. In fact, I haven’t seen her since the ball last night, which she spent in Mother’s private sitting room after those two sets she danced.”

“Her attendance was only to let her see what went on at a society function. If she was more comfortable with her drawings, then I take no fault.”

“I should have monitored her better!” Again, his voice was raised and echoed in the corridor. “Yet I was too damned distracted by... everything else.”

What would he have said if he hadn’t chosen to gloss over his original words? “We all were. It was a busy evening. And you could do nothing less with your parents hosting.” With a frown, she skittered backward as he barreled into the room, apparently undeterred. “Where *is* Jane, by the by?”

“You tell me.” He handed her the journal, shoved it into her hold, really. “This was beneath her pillow, and the most recent entry is quite damning.”

“Oh?” With shaking hands, Felicity opened the book, thumbed through the pages until she came to the last entry. The strokes of the pen had an angry bent, and some of the letters held strong slashes as they’d been formed. A few drops of ink dotted the page, as if the writer had paused a few times while writing. In other places, what looked like tears had smeared the ink. Clearly, Jane had been possessed of high emotion as she’d composed the entry. “Oh, no.”

*I have grown weary of being constantly teased
by girls who say they are friends to my face and*

then gossip about me when I am not there. How can they say such horrid things about me and my drawings? Why can I not exist in Italy during the Renaissance, where such things were celebrated?

A few tear stains decorated the pages.

Regardless of what my father and Miss Hixton say, I am unable to ignore the slights, for the pain is very real, and it is my life. Perhaps it is true that I do not belong in society; I certainly do not feel like an earl's granddaughter, and I don't like the thought of disappointing my family, but I must believe there is more to a future than being a wife and mother or keeping a house. Worse, I could become a governess, but I do not have the head for numbers that Papa has.

A series of dots followed, and Felicity could almost hear Jane's thoughts as she'd composed the entry.

Ever since Mama died, I have been so lost and lonely. Miss Hixton's presence made that better for a time, as did Papa's renewed closeness, but they are both too involved with their engagement and each other to keep me in mind. Scandal, I think, is more interesting.

Heat went through Felicity's cheeks at the thought of what the girl might have witnessed, but she refused to glance at Hugh. A large ink blot interrupted the entry as if she'd rested the nub on the page.

All of this to say that perhaps everyone would fare better if I weren't not around to be in the way or cause embarrassment, so I am going to my favorite place—Hyde Park. Nature always uplifts my soul, but this time, I shall walk out onto the bits of the frozen Serpentine, and if fate is kind, that foundation will break beneath my feet. I have heard drowning to be nearly painless, and there is a poetic sort of beauty about it...

Merciful heavens. The girl's musings reminded her so much of her own life during that age, when everything was confusing, and it had felt as if no one understood. It had been a horrible time, but as with everything, the darkness had passed, and she had grown into a young lady. By the time she'd completed her first year of finishing school, many of those unfathomable thoughts and situations had evaporated.

Until the next time.

"Surely, she doesn't wish to end her life. How tragic and horrific that would be," she said in a strangled whisper as she finally met Hugh's gaze. "It is merely how young ladies grow and change into the next phase of their lives. Their struggles are quite magnified, but are in reality tempests in teapots."

"Everyone is not as practical or uncaring as you!" Anger fairly blazed in those dark depths. "Obviously, she does intend to do exactly what she's written, and I believe her."

A stab of annoyance went through her chest. "I am *not* uncaring. In fact, I have tried to be a friend to your daughter, to guide her."

"Ha." He briefly pointed his gaze to the ceiling. "If you truly cared, she wouldn't be feeling like this."

"That is an unfounded statement. Every young person has their trials and tribulations as they come of age. Don't pretend you weren't lost." Felicity narrowed her gaze on him.

“Besides, *you* were the one who abandoned her for five years. I’d say the fault lies more on your shoulders.” When hurt reflected in his eyes, she shook her head. “Putting that aside for the time being, why do you feel she’ll harm herself?”

“I remember her liking Hyde Park. When her mother was alive, we would have family outings there, watch the ducks and geese on the water. Even back then, Jane would sketch practically everything she saw...” He broke off with a strangled sort of sob and turned slightly away from her. Why was he afraid of showing such emotion? It was a natural part of life.

“Let’s not panic.” Except the knots in her belly belied that suggestion. As she closed the journal, Felicity took a few steps toward him. “Perhaps she has gone to a friend’s home.”

“Are you daft?” He turned about so quickly, she gasped, for rage and anxiety warred for dominance in his expression. “She said she didn’t have any friends. That they all made jest of her.” For several long seconds, Hugh glared at her, continued coming at her while she retreated until an armoire halted her flight. “This is clearly your fault.”

She clutched the journal to her chest. “My fault? What gave you that impression?”

A snort of derision escaped him. “Your only purpose in being beneath this roof was to play companion to Jane, help her come to terms with her responsibilities within society, and perhaps slowly introduce her to the same.” He shoved a hand through his hair, leaving the dark brown strands in furrowed rows. “Instead, you have put ideas of independence into her mind, and since that will be difficult to achieve, she feels even worse about things. She is *my* daughter, not yours.”

“You asked me for help with her!” Hurt stabbed into her chest. “My *only* purpose, you say.” As hot annoyance poured through her being, it collided with a wall of hurt, and to her mortification tears welled in her eyes. “Then I suppose all the other moments we’ve shared were naught but stupidity on my part and selfishness on yours.” When she tried to move around him, he planted a palm on the armoire at one side of

her head, effectively holding her between him and it. “It seems my initial assessment of you was correct, then.”

“How so?” The warmth of his breath skated along her cheek. Though he was still horribly angry, there was a magnetic energy, a certain pull about him that threatened to suck her beneath his spell.

“Where I thought you were a man of honor, that you were essentially a gentleman, clearly I was wrong.” What had she been thinking when they’d come together in the library that night? “Any man who won’t take responsibility for his own actions is essentially a cad who is only concerned about his own outcomes.”

“A bit of the pot calling the kettle black, hmm, Miss Hixton?”

She trembled, for the heat of him, the sandalwood scent of him was quite intoxicating even though they were in the midst of this argument. “Not once have I done anything for my own good. I have fought against this engagement, but I’ve supported Jane even through her mercurial moods.” A ball of unshed tears lodged in her throat, and she swallowed in the hopes of dislodging it. “Though perhaps I *did* have one selfish moment when I wished to know what it felt like to be desired by a man... by you.”

For the space of a few heartbeats, his eyes darkened, and she thought he might try to kiss her, but then he held himself back, looked at her as if he had no idea how they’d come to this moment. “Since this engagement was forced, I have striven to make it into a real partnership, yet at every turn, you kept me at arm’s length. No matter what I do, no matter how many gifts or concessions or embraces, you hide behind those thorns without trust. How the hell do you think that makes me feel?”

That was something she’d not considered before, but there was no time to think about it now. “How do you think *I* feel?” She wasn’t about to give quarter, so she deflected the blame. “I have been shown time and time again that men aren’t trustworthy—”

“Except I am, yet you refuse to see that!” Hugh sprang back from her as if she’d burned him. “There comes a time in a man’s life where he’ll stop trying when he’s not wanted. Perhaps we’ve reached that moment.”

Hurt continued to stab through her chest. In some disconnected portion of her brain, she realized they both were attempting to wound each other through words out of fear, but she couldn’t help but feel that betrayal. “Perhaps we have.” Her fingers dug into the leather of Jane’s journal. Yes, he was frightened his daughter was missing, but it was outside of enough to blame her, and she couldn’t justify accepting that as her due. “Once we find Jane, we need to talk honestly about the future. It may come out that we are simply not compatible.” But at the back of her mind, she vowed to break the engagement.

Devil take the man.

Surprise and annoyance warred for dominance in his eyes. “Jane is my first concern.”

“And so she should be.” Finally, Felicity found the courage to shove past him and gain the corridor beyond. She tossed the journal to a small table just inside the door. “I am not important and never have been. That fact has never been driven home to me harder than now, so thank you for the clarification.”

A heavy sigh came from him. “Felicity, wait. I didn’t mean that.”

She shook her head. “Tell the butler to ready the carriage. We’ll go out to Hyde Park and search for Jane. After that, I will pack my things and return to my parents’ house for the duration until something else can be decided.”

Then she moved along the corridor without a backward glance even though her heart was cracking and crumbling. How fortunate she’d never made the mistake of letting herself complete the fall of him.

“If you choose to run every time you encounter a bump in the road, you won’t go very far in life!” he called after her.

“Obstacles are how we grow, or so I’ve recently learned.”

Stifling a sob, she pressed a hand to her chest where her heart ached but continued to walk. Did she have the strength to continue to fight?

Twenty minutes later, she sat on the bench opposite him in the closed carriage. Hot bricks waited on the floorboards while a lap blanket lay folded on both benches. She hadn’t spoken a word to Hugh since thanking him for handing her into the carriage on the street. A couple of times, he’d uttered a comment or statement that might have encouraged her to engage in a conversation with him, but Felicity remained firm in her resolve to keep herself aloof. The truth of it was, she should never have let down her guard, for she always ended up hurt.

Obviously, this stint with Hugh and Jane had proved no different.

Yet she couldn’t rid herself of the feeling she would lose something beyond valuable if she walked out of their lives.

Once at Hyde Park, she accepted his assistance out of the vehicle, then hunching into her pelisse, for it was cold under the afternoon sunshine, she walked quickly but silently beside him as they scurried along one of the paths toward the Serpentine. Though it was cold, and snowflakes lazily drifted through the air, especially when falling from tree branches, there were handfuls of people making use of the walking paths. With every step, she couldn’t help but think this was the last time she would be in his company, and that thought made her catch her breath.

“Felicity, please know that everything I said before was prompted by too much emotion, by fear,” he said as he touched her arm.

Her heart squeezed, for she realized he wasn’t the selfish arse she’d accused him of being. “Now is not the time.” She grasped his hand and pointed. “Look! There’s Jane.”

Through the winter bare trees, there was a flash of red. The girl had worn a pelisse in that scarlet color, which made her easily identifiable, as did the matching ribbons on the bonnet. While Felicity and Hugh hurried toward that location, she kept her eyes on the girl as she skated over the ice on a portion of the river that had already frozen over. Had she moved past her discontent or was she hoping an accident would happen? It was difficult to tell from such a distance.

“Jane!” Hugh’s hail had more than a few people turning about to look in their direction.

The girl jerked about, straining to peer in their direction. “Papa!”

It might have been a happy reunion if fate had left it at that, but fate had always been a fickle mistress. A loud oddly ominous cracking sound rent the air, quickly followed by a scream of horror, and as Felicity watched, Jane tumbled to the ice. She hadn’t fallen through, but with the ice continuing to crack, it was only a matter of time.

“Jane!” She screamed out the girl’s name the same time Hugh did. With panic rising in her chest and gooseflesh popping on her skin, she met his frightened gaze and clutched his hand. “We must help her. Run before it’s too late!”

Chapter Fifteen



Dear God.

Hugh stared in horror as he and Felicity ran to where his daughter lay on her side on the perilous ice. When he'd read that entry in her journal, he'd been beside himself with worry to think that Jane, his only child, was so unhappy and unsatisfied with her life that she might wish to end it, but being lonely was a powerful motivator. And in that fear, he'd lashed out at Felicity, which had caused unwanted friction between them.

But he couldn't worry about that now, not while his daughter was in peril.

"Jane!" By the time they reached the edge of the ice, a crowd of people had formed, everyone looking on with varying degrees of shock and horror.

"Papa!" His daughter pushed herself up on one arm. "Something is wrong with my ankle. It hurts to move it."

"Stay there. I'm coming to get you." With his pulse hammering through his veins, he waved everyone back. "Stay off the ice. Too much weight and crowds will only aggravate the situation." He looked at Felicity. All color had faded from her face. "Remain here."

"No." She put a gloved hand on his arm, staying his movement. "You are heavier with more likelihood of further breaking the ice. I'll go." There was a determined glint in her blue-green eyes which meant arguing with her would be pointless.

Yet he couldn't allow that to happen. "You might not think me a gentleman, but I am, at my core, exactly that. Let me do this. It's my daughter."

“Oh, you’ve made that abundantly clear.”

He huffed, for she was far too stubborn. “I only meant you needn’t put yourself into danger as well.”

“I can do this. In the event you have overlooked that, I’m quite capable.” With narrowed eyes, she released him. “Once Jane is safe, I rather think we shouldn’t continue this engagement,” she said in a lowered voice. “There are far too many problems between us that can’t be bridged. We are too different.” Then she put one foot on the ice and slowly shuffled her feet until she neared Jane’s location.

“Damn and blast. Lord spare me from forthright women,” he muttered as he carefully set out after her. Except that quality was one of the things he adored about her, as well as her unfailing concern for his daughter. How did she not realize he loved her, that everything he’d done practically since they’d gotten engaged was for the benefit of her and Jane? That challenges only put delicious spice into a relationship?

“Careful, Felicity.” The ice was slick beneath his boot soles, but once he had the gist of moving himself over it, he soon lost his fear of it. Here and there, water seeped upward, for the ice in places wasn’t as thick as he’d like it to be. “If you can, keep yourself on the more solid parts as you help her up.”

“So now you are an expert on retrieving people who’ve fallen on the ice and might have sprained ankles?” If her tones were slightly waspish, he couldn’t blame her. This was a trying situation.

Still, a grin tugged at the corners of his lips, for every word from her tart mouth meant she could possibly be brought around. He wouldn’t let her leave without first trying to charm his way back into her good graces... or finally land there. “I am merely conveying information.”

“Papa, hurry!” The terror in Jane’s voice brought the danger into sharp focus. “I’ll need help standing and walking.”

“We’re coming, poppet.”

“How did you know where to find me?” Shivers racked Jane’s frame.

“I found your journal, read the last entry, and knew you’d come here like we used to.” He met Felicity’s gaze, and his chest tightened to see the strain and concern in her eyes. They had much to discuss in order to repair their relationship; he needed them both to weather life’s storms in the future. “Ready?”

She nodded. Slowly, she approached the spot where Jane had fallen. Inch by inch, she knelt on the ice next to the girl. “No sudden movements else the ice will continue to fracture,” she said to Hugh’s daughter with low, steady tones. As she spoke, Felicity unlaced the blades from Jane’s half boots. Once they fell to the ice, she extended a hand. “No harsh struggling. When I stand, I will slowly pull you up with me.”

“All right.” The second Jane put her hand into Felicity’s, Hugh released his held breath. “I am glad you’re here, Miss Hixton.”

“Here we go.” Felicity slowly struggled to her feet, and just as she promised, she helped Jane into a standing position, easily ignoring the girl’s earnestness. “Don’t put much weight on your injured ankle; your father will carry you once it’s safe to do so.”

“Thank you.” The girl clung to Felicity, and another crack sounded from the ice. “I’m so sorry I wrote those things in my journal.”

“Shh.” She avoided Jane’s eyes. “Sometimes we can’t help how we feel. It just happens. The most we can hope is there will be someone who understands us, someone to sit with us in the quiet while we go through those emotions.”

Hugh bounced his gaze between them, and his heart seemed to expand. Those ladies were his life, and he wouldn’t stop fighting until they were a family. “Come, Jane. Slide over here as best you can. I’ll take you the rest of the way.” Hugh extended a hand to his daughter but looked at Felicity. “Once she is safely ashore, I’ll come back to assist you.”

“I can look after myself.” With the slight tilt of her chin, Felicity stared him down as she released Jane into his care. “Get to safety.”

“Damn fool woman,” he muttered. Jane’s hands clinging to his sleeve recalled him to the moment, and the second he lifted his daughter into his arms, the ominous sound of the ice cracking echoed in the air. Then, he could only watch in horror as he stumbled backward in the hopes of redistributing his weight while at the same time, Felicity lost her footing.

Seconds later, she fell into the water and vanished beneath its surface, leaving only large chunks of ice behind.

“Felicity!” In that moment, his heart dropped to his stomach, and he knew how much he loved her but never had the chance to tell her. “Dear God.”

“What are you waiting for, Papa?” Jane squirmed in his arms. She beat a fist on his chest. “Put me down and rescue Miss Hixton. We need her.”

“Yes, we do.” Hearing his daughter confirm what he’d been thinking spurred him into action. “You do what you have to in order to stay safe. Hear me?” As gently as he could, Hugh set her onto her feet.

“Go!” Again, she shoved him, this time on his arm as she teetered on one leg. “Save her.”

At that moment, Felicity’s head broke the surface. Somehow, her bonnet had dislodged and hung weirdly on her back. The drenched masses of her hair lay matted to her head. Her gloved fingers scrabbled at the edge of the thicker ice. “Hugh! Help!”

“I’m here.” With deliberate movements he came toward her then knelt on the ice, mindful of the jagged edge and the constant cracking all around him. Jane waited somewhere behind him where the ice was a bit more stable. He hoped. “Give me your hand. I’ll pull you out.”

“My skirts are snagged.” Her words were rushed and remarkably, she hiccupped. “There must be a fallen tree

beneath. One of the branches is twisted in the fabric.”

Well, damn. “Kick your way free.”

“Don’t you think I’ve tried that?” Fear shadowed her eyes, so deep they were completely blue in the sunlight. One of her hands slipped from the ice, but she quickly grabbed at the edge as her gaze connected to his. “I don’t want this to be how I leave the mortal coil.”

“Let Papa help you, Miss Hixton!” Jane slid to a spot next to him, kneeling and leaning slightly forward. “It’s cold and I want to go home.”

Hugh huffed. Did no one follow instructions when he issued them? “Damn it, Jane, get to safety.” He risked glancing over his shoulder at some of the people watching from the shore. “Someone bring her a blanket, keep her away from the ice!”

“Papa!” Jane violently shook her head.

“I can’t rescue Felicity if I’m worried about you as well. Go!” He would apologize later. Then he focused all his concentration on Felicity to the point he had to ignore the continued cracking of the ice. “Listen to me, Lissie,” he said in a low voice as he laid on his stomach to more evenly spread his weight and take strain off the ice. “Give me your hand. I’ll pull you up, regardless of if you’re stuck or not.” He offered her his right hand.

“Go tend to Jane.”

“I can’t—won’t—do that.”

Shivering, she shook her head. “I’m stuck so pulling at me won’t help. Go!”

Why did he have to fall in love with such a recalcitrant woman? “Don’t argue with me. I’m trying to save your life.”

“Ha!” She blew out a breath that drifted about her head in the cold. “But it’s *my* life. You don’t get to decide what I do with it. Just as you need to do the same with yours... and we should do that apart.”

Surely, she wasn't hinting at what he thought. Hurt moved through his chest, forcing him to ignore the cold that seeped into his clothing. "You would rather toss that life away than spend the rest of it with me?" He wasn't successful in keeping the pain and emotion from his voice. "After everything we've shared and done together?"

Her teeth chattered as she looked at him. A hiccup escaped, echoing over the ice. "I made my decision on the drive over here." Once more, she slipped further into the water, but she managed to hold onto the edge of the ice, albeit awkwardly. "This afternoon has shown me we are ill-suited, and binding myself to you would be too painful, especially if something were to go wrong."

"Something *is* going wrong right now! Let me solve it!" Exasperation rang in his tones. Every second that passed kept her in the freezing water and let the ice weaken further. "If you want to argue, so be it, but we can do that somewhere warm and dry." He wriggled the fingers on his hand. When she remained resolute, deep sadness settled over him. "Don't you know that if you leave, if you choose to die here in this godforsaken water, that I *will* mourn your absence? You will be selfish in that regard, merely to spare yourself pain?"

"Pish." An unladylike snort escaped Felicity, quickly followed by a string of hiccups. Her teeth chattered together. "How is that possible? We've known each other for barely two weeks, and part of that time you have avoided anything smacking of domesticity."

Fair enough. "I don't know. Life is sometimes mysterious, but there will be time to puzzle that out later."

"Let me go."

"I can't do that." He shook his hand once more. It was time to be truthful, for perhaps that was the only way she could understand. "All I know is how I feel, and Lissie, I love you, to the depths of my being, in every corner of my heart, you are the only woman I could ever conceive of marrying in this phase of my life, the only woman I wish to grow old beside." As he peered into her eyes and hoped to God she saw

his honesty, the longing in hers gave him hope. “Truly, sweeting, I love you, so please, put away your prickles for good and let me do exactly that with you, show you for years to come I’m not giving you charm and lip service.”

“I...” Her fingers slipped on the ice. *Hiccup!*

It was ridiculous to have this conversation here, but there was nothing for it. “There is no guarantee in life regardless of how much we want that, but you must have faith in *something*. I won’t leave you, Lissie. I promise. You are becoming an integral part of my life—my family.”

“Papa is right.” Jane had apparently escaped the person who’d escorted her to the shore, stood slightly behind him with a hand on his shoulder. “I need you, Miss Hixton, need your direction, need your solid presence to keep me anchored, to help me grow, because I’m not mature enough to guide myself.”

Perhaps the woman would listen to his daughter, for she was an expert at doing the same to him. “What say you, Felicity?”

For the space of a few heartbeats, there was nothing but silence as tears filled her eyes. A few hiccups left her throat. “I’d be quite the silly goose if I ignored the both of you and decided to let the water have at me, wouldn’t I?”

Dear God in heaven, she was finally seeing sense. “Yes.” Hugh nodded and a sense of urgency filled his chest. “We are wasting time. You’re freezing and risk hypothermia. Take my hand.”

In fact, her lips were slightly blue. “I’m still stuck. The cold is making it difficult to move my limbs.”

“Stubborn until the end, eh?” He followed the rhetorical question with a huff. “Tear the damned skirting, sweeting. I’ll buy you three new gowns to replace it. I merely want you.” It was perhaps the most honest thing he’d said to her since they’d met.

“Oh.” Her trembling lips formed an “o” of awe. “I have to let go of the ice in order to tear the fabric.”

“Right.” She might not come back up from beneath the frigid water. Pain radiated around his heart, but he nodded. “Do it swiftly, then. I’m not going anywhere. The second you finish, give me your hand. I’ll pull you out.”

“We both will,” Jane said with an ardent nod.

“I’m so cold I can barely function.”

“You must. For me. For us.” The urge to retch with fear took hold. There was nothing he could do except get into the water with her and endanger them both.

“Say a prayer.” Holding his gaze, Felicity released her hold on the ice. Immediately, she went under the surface.

Hot panic filled Hugh’s chest. He clutched Jane’s hand as he stared intently at the gap between the ice where she’d disappeared into. If he lost her, he didn’t know what would become of him or his daughter. Another loud crack in the ice drove home the urgency of the situation. “Damn it, Felicity, hurry!” The wait was interminable. He turned to Jane. “Something is wrong. I’m going in after her.”

“No, Papa, no. Wait, just a few seconds longer.”

“But I…”

Bubbles formed on the water’s surface then moments later Felicity’s head broke through. She gasped for breath.

“There she is!” Jane screaming in his ear was most unwelcome, but he agreed with her enthusiasm. “Get her!”

He didn’t waste any more time. “Grasp my hand.” Once more, and hopefully for the final time, he extended his hand and arm, didn’t care that the sleeve of his greatcoat and his glove were wet.

“My limbs won’t obey the commands of my brain.” The chattering of her teeth punctuated that point. “S-s-so cold.”

They were so close. “Damn it, Lissie, give me your hand!” He thrust his further into the water as he searched for hers. “I need you.” The wait would kill him, for he couldn’t breathe as he waited endless eternities for her to do what he

asked. "Please say you trust me. After all this, please say at least that."

With a cry, Felicity shoved her hand into his. "I trust you."

Immediately, he wrapped his gloved fingers around hers. "Carefully but quickly." Little by little, as he got to his knees, Hugh pulled her up with Jane's help, and when her chest scraped over the edge of the ice, he grunted. "Almost there." Another crack in the ice encouraged him to put a fast end to this situation. Jane whimpered as she put weight on her ankle in order to assist him. When he was able, Hugh stood, and that was when they finally dragged Felicity fully out of the water. The wreck of her torn skirting stuck to her legs, but she was the most beautiful and darling sight he'd seen in a few years. When she was more or less standing, he engulfed her into a hug, held her so close to him that he heard the hammering of her heartbeat, felt the heavy chill in her body. "Dear God, I thought I had lost you."

She shivered in his hold, almost as if she couldn't stop. "I feared I *was* very nearly lost."

"At least you frightened away your hiccups," he whispered against her cold, wet hair.

"True." Her laughter was forced and shaky, but she pulled slightly away. "Hugh..." When she peered into his eyes, the unmistakable emotions playing there stalled his breath. "I don't want to be lost or unloved—unlovable—any longer."

"Meaning?" He had to be absolutely certain.

She held him about the waist and slumped into him. "I love you too."

With a cry of victory, Hugh pulled her closer, and despite the crowd that had formed on the shore, he kissed her, quite soundly, and much to the amusement and delight of his daughter. Hot damn, but it was the best kiss he'd shared in recent history, and he only hoped it would warm her lips. Eventually, when Jane tapped his shoulder, he pulled away

with a chuckle. “We should go home. You are frozen to the bone—you both are.” He bounced his gaze between Felicity and his daughter.

“I’ll admit, it is rather lovely to be cared for, to *let* someone care for me.”

He flashed a pleased grin. “I keep telling you I am genuine, that you will never be alone, that I will always protect you.”

“I am glad you weren’t seriously harmed,” Jane said as she tucked the blanket she wore about Felicity’s shoulders.

“Now come.” Slipping an arm about Felicity’s waist, he slowly led her toward the shore. “I won’t have either one of my girls procuring head colds on my watch. We have far too much planning to attend to have you both down with illness.”

“Do hush, Papa.” Jane limped along behind them. “We’re not invalids.”

Uncommon happiness bubbled through his chest and brought a wave of warmth with it. After all these years, he *was* happy again, joyful even. “Until I can see for myself both of you are well, I’m ordering you to your respective bedchambers where you will stay for a few days. No exceptions.” When he met Felicity’s gaze, the wicked but exhausted gleam deep in those depths promised something he couldn’t wait to discover. “Let us hurry to the carriage. Your legs are on display, and while *I* appreciate the view, I am quite selfish and don’t want any other man to look upon you.” Against the shell of her ear, he whispered, “Or see what’s mine. “

“Don’t be absurd. Everyone has legs.” When she smiled, he nearly went on his knees before her. “At least this time the scandal didn’t involve a mouse.”

“Oh, indeed.” Oddly enough, he laughed, finally let his lungs expand and indulge in a hearty laugh. “A mouse!” With a glance at Jane who frowned with puzzlement back, he released his fiancée. “Come, poppet. No need to hobble. The carriage isn’t far.” He grinned when his daughter squealed as

he scooped her into his arms. “Today is a good day, and the first one in our new lives.”

And he couldn't wait until everyone had rested before they could all make plans.

Chapter Sixteen



February 18, 1818

Tulip Place

No. 2 Chapel Street, Grosvenor Square

London

Felicity yawned as she peered out her bedroom window overlooking the quiet street on which the townhouse sat. Light snow fell gently down from an overcast sky, and the chill emanating from the window glass sent a shiver down a spine. She pulled her shawl of lavender wool more tightly about her shoulders and let her mind wander.

It had been two days since that horrible afternoon when she'd fallen through the ice on the Serpentine which had led to Hugh rescuing her. Two days since he'd told her he loved her. Two days since she'd said the same to him.

And nearly two days since she'd seen him, for he'd been rather scarce.

Once she and Jane were conveyed home, they'd been immediately fussed over by the staff and then promptly conveyed to their respective rooms and put to bed. Jane had apparently suffered a mild strain to her right ankle. After a week's rest, it should be right as rain, or so the physician Hugh had summoned had decreed.

After a cursory examination from the man, Felicity had been ordered to remain in bed for a few days beneath blankets with hot water bottles and many cups of hot tea, but she didn't suffer from hyperthermia or any other ill effects from her dunk into the frigid water. Though she'd acquired a few scrapes and

cuts when she'd been pulled over the edge of the ice, she was none the worse for wear.

Neither had she nor Jane contracted head colds or pneumonia.

So she had followed the doctor's orders by staying mostly in bed with nothing to keep her occupied except poring through as many books as she wished, perusing periodicals she never had time for previously, writing letters to her heart's content, napping when she felt like it, ordering anything from the kitchen whenever she wanted, and so on. But as lovely and restorative as all that had been, she soon grew bored, and though her body needed the rest, all she wanted to do was talk with Hugh. After their exchange at the Serpentine, there was still much to say.

Yet she suspected he was avoiding her.

Despite that, she'd had company, for Jane had visited during the past two days. According to her, if they were both ordered to stay in the house, they might as well catch up on gossip, and that was exactly what they'd done. Their relationship had shifted, changed, and they'd grown closer. The entry in her journal had been discussed and talked about, as had the girl's well-being. After that, they'd made plans for how best support could be given as well as help when needed, and moving forward, Felicity felt as if they were both on more solid ground than they'd been before.

"Miss Hixton?"

The sound of Jane's voice had her turning about and smiling. "Bored again, are you?"

"Not exactly." An expression of unease crossed the girl's face as she hobbled into Felicity's room. "Do you have time to talk?"

"Of course." She gestured the girl in and to a green brocade sofa to one side of the room. "Sit here with me." Then she perched on the edge of a cushion and waited until Jane joined her. "Does your ankle pain you?"

“Not as much as that day, but it’s a dull ache. Manageable if I keep my weight off it.” When she dropped onto the other cushion, she shifted her position in order to prop up the leg a bit. “I’d like to talk about Papa.”

So would I. “Is everything well between the two of you? I haven’t seen him much since that day on the ice.”

“Perhaps he has been busy or has things on his mind.” Jane shrugged. “I’m worried about him.”

“Why?”

The girl sighed. “I don’t wish for him to remain sad from my mother’s death, and ever since you arrived in his life, I’ve seen him smile and even laugh for the first time in a long while.” As she paused for breath, she frowned. “He needs someone.” Her eyes sparkled. “He needs you.”

It was nice to hear, of course, but it wasn’t the gist of this conversation. “So do you, I suspect.”

“Yes.” A blush stained Jane’s cheeks. “I’ve missed having someone to talk with. Papa does his best but...”

Felicity smiled. “You need another woman about to ask questions a father simply can’t field.”

“Yes!” When the girl laughed, so did she. “I’ve seen how the two of you are in each other’s company. It’s quite wonderful, hopeful, even. Will you marry him? There is some confusion regarding the engagement, I’ll wager, since that day on the ice, and I think Papa is agonizing over that.”

“Right, and that’s my fault.” Felicity blew out a breath while heat went through her cheeks. “I don’t know about marriage. Your father hasn’t asked, nor has he discussed anything with me about the engagement.” Knots of concern pulled in her belly. It was one thing to declare himself and for her to admit to feeling the same things for him, but there had been no proposal, no renewed commitment, and he had stayed away from her for two days without a word.

What did it mean? Would yet another person in her life disappoint her?

“Everything is at sixes and sevens.” Jane reached for her hand and clutched it. “Do you want me to talk sense into him?”

“No, please don’t trouble yourself.” The last thing she needed was for the girl to involve herself in her father’s romantic life. “I will seek him out later and speak with him.” For the space of a few heartbeats, she stared at the girl in silence. “I can’t remain as your companion without an engagement, for that would be scandalous after everything, but I must know if he still wants our engagement to be real.”

“You said you loved him.” It wasn’t a question.

“I did say that, and I believe it’s true, not said out of the emotion in the moment.” The heat intensified in her cheeks. “But is any of it true? That remains to be seen.”

“He loves you, Miss Hixton. It’s quite a genuine attachment; I can tell. Because of that, I feel I’ve gotten my father back. He is more like the man I used to know, before Mama died and sadness overtook him, and he tried to hide doing questionable things.” Jane squeezed her fingers. “Please don’t go away. I’m rather enjoying having you about.”

“Oh!” Felicity scooted over and gave her an impromptu hug. “I’ve enjoyed it here as well, enjoyed coming to know you and your father better.”

Jane regarded her with bright eyes. “I hope things go properly wonderful when you have that conversation. Father is a good man.”

“I know he is.” Felicity patted the girl’s knee. “What would you say about ordering some pastries and tea from the kitchen, and perhaps you can show me more of your drawings?”

“I would adore that ever so much.”

And it would serve as a distraction until she could meet with Hugh.



Later that night

Felicity smoothed her palms down the front of her gown. The emerald satin shimmered and gleamed in the soft candlelight, while the silver trimming about the waist and bodice caught the light and bounced it back. She touched her hair that had been simply dressed in a loose chignon, held in place with a tortoiseshell comb.

If this gown doesn't spark a conversation with Hugh then nothing will.

As the longcase clock on the floor below struck the midnight hour, she quietly left her room and pulled the door closed behind her. After she checked in on Jane to make certain she slept, Felicity moved downstairs to the ground floor. If Hugh was a creature of habit, then no doubt she would find him in the library.

Only a few candles were lit in the room, and he occupied a portion of the room farthest from the door, nearly lost in the shadows. "Hugh? May I have a word? Unless I'm interrupting you, of course," she said as she came into the room and closed the door behind her.

He glanced up from contemplating a book in his lap, but a bit of perplexation still lined his face. "Felicity, no, you are not interrupting. In fact, I was thinking of going up to see you." As he rose to his feet, the book tumbled from his lap to thud softly upon the carpet. "Is all well?"

The drapes near his sofa hadn't been closed. A tea service rested abandoned on a small round ivory-inlaid table by his sofa. Lazy snowflakes drifted past the window; a few stuck to the glass, delicate and lacy in the dim light, but the man himself was what occupied her attention. Clad in a gold brocade waistcoat, fine lawn shirt that gaped at the neck due to

his cravat and collar being discarded earlier, buff-colored breeches, and boots, he was every bit the gentleman at leisure.

And he had the power to steal her breath.

“As for being well? I am rather uncertain.” She crept forward another few feet. “Before you ask, I’m not suffering any ill effects from being in the icy water. Perhaps a few abrasions.”

“Then why the concern?” Hugh met her where she stood in the middle of the furniture grouping. “Is Jane well?”

“Calm yourself.” Felicity held up a hand to prevent further questions on his part. “My most immediate concern is you.”

“Me?” Surprise rose his eyebrows up his forehead. “Why?”

“For one, Jane is still worried you are lonely. Beyond that, I would like to know why you didn’t come to check on me, to visit me these past two days.” Did he regret what he’d declared on that ice? “You had to pass my room each time you went down that corridor.”

“Fair enough.” For the space of a few heartbeats, he was silent while he clasped his hands behind his back, but he kept his dark gaze on her. “I did check in, actually, only it was while you slept, but when you were awake, I didn’t know what to say.”

“Why?” She frowned. “Am I that intimidating, then?”

“No, of course not, but...” As he hesitated, she hid her shaking hands in her skirting. “I stayed away, didn’t know what to say because I don’t want to remain engaged to you now.”

“What?” Whatever she’d been expecting him to say, that wasn’t it. Her stomach pitched while her heart plummeted. “I’m sorry, but what?” It bore repeating.

“Ah, you poor thing.” His grin, though charming, couldn’t lift her mood. “I mean not I do not wish to remain engaged to you under these pretenses or obligations or because

we've nothing else to do." As he spoke, he closed the distance between them. "In fact, I want to be engaged to you naturally, truthfully, and because we are in love."

Good heavens. Why is it suddenly so hot in here? Her cheeks burned. "Meaning?" She could hardly force the word from her tight throat, and she raised a hand to fan her face.

"Just this." Without another word, Hugh went down on one knee in front of her. He removed a ring from the pocket in his waistcoat and then held it aloft. Different from the ring he'd already given her, this one was a thin band of gleaming gold, embedded in intervals with tiny emeralds. "One of the reasons I was unavailable for the past two days was because I needed to pop over to one of my friends who is a jeweler so I could offer you this."

Felicity frowned. "I already have a ring."

"Yes, I know, but this one represents something different. Emeralds for thorns, you see, and the gold for new beginnings, prosperity, the future."

This was all too much. "Meaning?" Why couldn't she think of anything else to say? She no doubt looked like an idiot.

"I didn't think it that difficult to puzzle out, sweeting." The use of the endearment sent flutters through her lower belly. "Lissie, I'm asking you to marry me. Properly, this time, and not because I'm a rogue—"

"Former rogue," she couldn't help but interrupt.

"There is that." When he winked, the strength nearly left her knees. "A former rogue with a questionable past except those years I was married. Not because of that but due to the fact I want everything that domestication entails, and I want it with you."

"You do." It wasn't a question, but her mind whirled.

"I do." When he grabbed her right hand, a shiver moved down her spine. "I wish to be a husband again as well as a family man. With you at my side, I'll wager I can be a better husband and a better father to Jane."

“You are a good father now, but I understand what you are trying to say.”

“Yes, well, there is room for improvement, Lord knows.” The grin he flashed was positively devastating to her insides, and all she wanted to do was kiss him. “However, there is one thing more.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.” He tightened his grip on her hand. “You see, I love you to distraction. That was made quite clear to me when you fell beneath the ice.” His Adam’s apple bobbed with a hard swallow. “In those moments, I worried I had lost you, and my vision narrowed. I was nearly beside myself with fear. Life won’t be right unless you are in it.” The anxiety and vestiges of that fear still lingered at the backs of his eyes. A bout of nervous laughter escaped him. “I suppose you could say I love you quite desperately. Even through the wall of prickles I can see you have a wonderful, slightly sarcastic sense of humor. You genuinely care about my daughter, about me, about my staff. You sing like an angel and play the piano like the same. No doubt you have many other lovely qualities I can’t wait to discover.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “You are quite adorable. Did you know that?”

“I don’t know. Jane tells me with alarming frequency I’m out of touch and wouldn’t know a hole from my arse, so it seems perspective is everything.”

A hiccup escaped her, and then another. It was quite an emotional time. Somehow, she managed a half-snort half-laugh. “Indeed, it is.”

“As I was saying, there is no turning back for me, love, not that I want to.” Once again, he held up the ring, and the expression on his face was far too endearing, a mix of hope and vulnerability. “So, I shall ask you again. Felicity Hixton, *will* you marry me?”

How dear he was! Her hand trembled in his. “I will. I have grown weary of hiding, of holding people at arm’s length

because I'm afraid of being left behind or abandoned or afraid of caring. You changed all of that for me, and I half suspect if I turned you down now, you'd simply ignore my answer and continue on until you got your way."

"Of course I would, for winning you was a hard row to hoe, but it was worth every struggle," he quipped as he slipped the band onto the fourth finger of her right hand. Then he brought that hand up to his lips and kissed the back. "You are a delightful challenge, Lissie, and I hope you will never stop being that."

"Then don't you stop being a charming rogue who never gave up on me." She tugged on his hand until he scrambled to his feet. "Whatever else I find out about you, know this. Only a man of determination and strong will could have finally coaxed me from beyond those thorns."

"Well, when a lady has completely enchanted me, I'll stop at nothing until she's mine." Gently, he cupped her cheek, brushed the pad of his thumb over it to catch the tears, then he moved his hand to her nape. "I feel as if I've come to the end of a particularly difficult quest, and now I can rescue the fair maiden."

"What happens now?" She could scarcely breathe he was so close and smelled so good and she wanted him so very much.

"Can you not guess?" Wicked promise glimmered in his eyes. "But first, I shall settle for a kiss." When he dragged her against him with more intensity, she came willingly, and by the time he claimed her lips with his, she'd looped her arms about his shoulders and layered herself to his chest. "It's not so bad when a rogue falls, hmm?"

"It's delightfully wonderful." With a sigh of surrender, Felicity kissed him back and put every ounce of feeling she had for him into that one meeting. As he groaned, he slipped a hand down her spine, and at the curve of her rear, he squeezed a buttock, hauled her even closer, and then set out to apparently kiss all commonsense from her.

"Agreed."

Quite honestly, she didn't mind, for his lips were warm and firm, and good heavens his hands as they roved her body lit fires in her blood. Then his fingers were in her hair. The comb fell to the carpet at the same time her tresses tumbled about her back and shoulders. "I think, perhaps, I could be perfectly happy kissing you for the rest of my life," she whispered against his lips as she slipped her arms about his waist and began to manipulate the laces at the back of his waistcoat.

"That's too bad, for I had something else in mind for tonight." He kissed her again, this time with a bit more mastery and promise.

"Then we shouldn't delay, especially since making use of your library in this fashion will bring our relationship around full circle."

"Clever girl." He kissed his way down the side of her neck and then followed her low bodice with his lips. "As much as I adore this green gown on you, I'll like it that much better in a puddle on the floor."

Flutters chased through her belly as she helped him out of his waistcoat. "Best not keep me waiting too long else I pull that cloak of thorns back 'round me." Was it truly her that was teasing him, assisting him from his clothing?

"Ah, sweeting, I can't wait to marry you." And once more his arms were around her, and his lips on hers.

How had she ever thought she didn't need a man?

Chapter Seventeen



Hugh reminded himself to rein in his responses lest the night end far too early, but damn and blast, she was beautiful in emerald with her hair undone and desire darkening those wonderful blue-green eyes, and the warmth of her as he undid the laces at the back of her gown was slowly driving him mad.

“Bloody hell, sweeting, I can’t have enough of you,” he whispered as he led her over to the sofa he’d vacated earlier in the evening when she’d joined him. “I feel as if you are finally mine after a long campaign to win your heart.” It hadn’t been easy, and there had been many frustrations along the way, but they had come to an understanding.

“Yet in reality, it has only been just over two weeks.” As she tumbled to the sofa, she tugged him down beside her with a frown. “It’s too quick, don’t you think?”

“That depends. I fell for my first wife at a fast rate; I suppose when I know who I want, there is no changing my mind.”

“Can two people fall in love like that? And if they do, will the relationship last?” When she ran the tip of her tongue along her bottom lip, Hugh bit back a groan. “What if there is not a solid foundation for us? Surely, there must be more than mutual admiration and an intense attraction.”

For the next few seconds, he spent time pressing kisses to the underside of her jaw. “What? I was distracted.” He pulled back to regard her properly. “Many marriages begin with much less than what we already share. Besides, there are no rules when it comes to love or fate. I have learned that lesson over the course of my life.”

Felicity nodded, but there was a tempting frown tugging at her kiss-swollen lips. “I hope you’re right.” Though she shook her head, the worry in her eyes didn’t dislodge. It was still prevalent in the dim candlelight. “Though I do have another concern.”

He scratched at the scant stubble on his jaw. “I’ll try and set it at ease if I can.” At least the continued conversation did much to cool the rampant cockstand pressing against his breeches.

“What if you don’t like being married to me as much as you did Amelia?” In accordance to his urging, she relaxed against the sofa’s back and closed her eyes. “Don’t misunderstand me. I don’t wish to replace her, yet—”

Poor thing. “You are two very different women, which means I loved her differently than I do you.” Hugh gazed at his fiancée with a grin. *My fiancée. I am going to marry this woman!* “And it certainly doesn’t mean I love you less.” Amelia would always have a place in his heart, but she wouldn’t have wanted him to remain alone for the remainder of his life. “Does that set your mind at ease?” Yes, he wanted to bury his prick deep into her honeyed heat, but not until she accepted him unconditionally.

“It does, and I apologize if the questions make me seem like a ninny.” She popped open her eyes and looked steadily at him. “Being in love and wanting a man so much that it feels as if I’ll go out of my mind is quite a new experience.”

The penchant for plain speaking she’d always possessed never failed to amuse him. Life with Felicity would be exciting. “You are never a ninny, love. The ability to analyze things before jumping in is merely one of the qualities I admire about you.” He hoped she would pass that trait on to Jane.

“Thank you for that.” The grin she shot him brimmed with the same need currently coursing through his veins. With her honey-colored hair tangled about her shoulders and her gown rumped, she made a rather delicious picture.

“Please don’t worry. All will be well, and if it isn’t, we will smooth out the wrinkles together.” He scooped up her hand, brought it to his lips and then kissed the back. The faint scent of lilacs lingered upon her skin, and it was intoxicating. Renewed awareness tingled through his shaft.

“I’m looking forward to everything.” This time her smile sent desire shivering down his spine. “Do you want to enjoy a long engagement?”

Perish the thought. “That depends on many things, one of which is the fact I solidified my business partnership with Dashfield yesterday at the jeweler’s. In the spring once our two investors have been signed, we will open our counting house. By Christmas, we should have a stable of clients with a steady income.”

“That’s wonderful!” Felicity squeezed his fingers before releasing his hand. “I’m so proud of you. I know this is something you have hoped for.”

“Indeed, and if all goes well, I needn’t apply to my father for funding any longer.” Pride swelled Hugh’s chest as he drew his fingers down her leg to rest on her knee. The conversation needed to end so they could advance to more satisfying ways of communication. “I rather doubt a long engagement is suitable to our plans.”

“It seems you might be right.” Her grin was this side of cheeky. “I suppose we will just need to marry quickly, then. Perhaps there will be time for a wedding trip.”

“Absolutely there will be.” Never had he anticipated anything more.

Her gaze roved over his face. “And if we have children or not? Will you still love me?”

“Ah, sweeting, don’t tempt fate.” His mind whirled at the possibilities still in store for them that fate might give. Unable to leave off with his teasing, he slipped to the floor and reached for her skirts. “I will never not love you. In fact, you are quite stuck with me.”

“For better or for worse,” she whispered.

“No matter what.” Inch by inch, he encouraged the satin up her legs. The deep emerald color gleamed in the low light from the fire and candles. “You are mine, and nothing will change that.”

“Such lovely words, but my parents will be insufferable now. They’ll think they knew best when demanding this match.” Briefly, she closed her eyes while remaining in her recline, but her breathing had quickened.

He chuckled. Already her passion was piqued, and he couldn’t wait to do wicked things to her, for their last coupling had gone by too quickly. “We needn’t pay them any mind.”

“True.” A sigh shuddered from her. “There is also the matter of where you will send Jane for finishing school.”

“Which can be discussed at a later date when we will *both* make the decision.” Hugh pressed a feather-weighted kiss to each of her adorable knees, slowly spreading her legs as he went. Her beribboned garters tempted him, but he left them and the ivory hosiery alone, for it was far too arousing. Soon he would be lost in the glory that was Lissie and there would be no more talk. “Will there be any more distractions?”

She waved a hand. “Don’t ask me that, for there is so much to attend to.”

“Nothing that is urgent. This time is for me to show you how much I want you, need you, love you.” He danced his fingers along her bare thigh. “Now, shall we move our conversation to something more personal and far more erotic?” He drew his fingers up and down the inside of one of her silky thighs.

“Yes.” Then a sigh escaped her when he let his fingers drift higher until his knuckles brushed the curls shrouding her sex. “Oh, you make me feel as if I’ll swoon.”

“Then I must be doing something correctly.” Damn, but she was a fetching offering. “I don’t know what the future holds for us, but life won’t be dull.” Should he pleasure her orally, or would it be best to tug her down to the floor with

him, encourage her to ride him? So many things to teach her, enjoy with her.

“Perhaps.” The word was breathless. To what did she refer? It didn’t matter, for Felicity put an end to the conundrum for him by sliding off the sofa and kneeling before him on the thick carpet. The silver embroidery lining the scooped bodice of her gown twinkled in the dim light.

“I adore how that future is beginning right now.” Unable to stay separated from her, Hugh nibbled a path along the side of her neck. When he reached her shoulder, he kissed a line up the return trip.

“Me too.” A hiccup mixed with a moan to provoke the most unusual sound. She giggled when he chuckled and plucked at the placket of his fine lawn shirt. “This is so scandalous. Should we move upstairs?”

“And waste momentum?” Anticipating her next inclination, he pulled the garment up and over his head. The chill in the air kissed his skin, further ramping his desire. Tossing the garment away, he said, “Explore if the spirit moves you.”

“You might regret that. I am quite curious about your form.” Her low-pitched, husky laughter sent need skittering through him, but she drew her fingers over his chest, casually tangling those slender digits in the mat of hair there.

He hissed out a breath. “I am at your disposal.” Frantically, he finished working the laces at the back of her gown, and when the bodice gaped, his throat went dry.

“There are so many things I can’t wait to try, to see and experience.”

“Let us start.” Hugh cupped her face between his palms, threading his fingers into her hair. “I want you.” Then he claimed her mouth with firm intent because he could, because he would lose his mind if he didn’t. He treated her to long, drugging kisses that went deeper and harder each time, robbing them both of breath, and when she clutched at him and molded herself to his form, he pushed the gown off her

shoulders and arms until it pooled at her waist. There was something quite erotic about seeing a woman in such dishabille with her stays and chemise on display and passion in her eyes.

It took next to no time to divest her of the gown. Once he'd thrown it to the floor to join his shirt, he said, "Let me love you, make you forget about your anxiety if only for a few, fleeting moments, to show you we belong together regardless of how fast love came upon us."

"You'll find no argument from me." Felicity lounged on her back and reached her arms up for him. "Make me fly. I have wished to do that again since the first." When he covered her body with his, she smoothed her hands down his bare back. "Oh, Hugh, thank you for everything." She caressed his backside. "My life and outlook have changed tenfold." The cheeky woman squeezed one of his buttocks.

Sensation streaked through his member and tingled in his stones. His groan echoed eerily in the room. "While I am glad for that, at the moment, I merely want to see you satisfied." He yanked at the laces of her stays, loosening them.

"You are quite skilled in that," she murmured. Her fingers bumped his as they worked the ties holding the upper portion of her shift closed as well as her stays.

"Well, I do enjoy it." His chuckle rang with conceit, and he didn't care. Where she was concerned, there were no boundaries and nothing he wouldn't do. Finally, Hugh wrenched both garments open enough that her breasts popped free of the fabric. The pale skin in the dim illumination tempted him, and he was lost. Needing to see all of her, he manipulated the garments until they were off her body. "So gorgeous." Several moments went by fondling those perfect globes, as well as licking, nipping, and suckling the erect, rosy nipples that would forever tempt him.

"Dear heavens." Felicity arched her back. Once hand scabbled on the carpet. "More." She wrapped her free hand around his neck and encouraged him closer. "So thrilling."

The passion-laden whisper stoked the fire in his blood into infernos. His shaft throbbed painfully against the front of his breeches. "I'll return in a twinkling." With a lingering kiss to her mouth, he lifted off her body merely to stare at her on the carpet, naked with the exception of her stockings, garters and slippers. What had he ever done good in his life that fate would have given her to him?

"Cat got your tongue, Mr. Ridgeway?" she asked with amusement in her tone.

"Just admiring my soon-to-be wife." God, those words were quite potent! Never had he pulled off his boots or divested himself of his breeches faster. "Ah, sweeting, I could gaze at you for hours." Her lips—kiss-swollen and slightly parted—coupled with her eyes that had darkened with desire as she watched him, and the slight light of the dancing candle flames that gave her skin a rosy glow all worked to present a memorable picture. "You are an artist's dream."

"Hush, you." But she smiled. "I'd rather you appreciate me now." She bent her knees and opened her legs, sighing when he settled in the cradle between her thighs.

"That is the plan." Hugh caught her hands in his and brought them up over her head. He pressed them to the floor. "I'm the most fortunate man." Slowly, to tease and torment, he thrust into her tight passage but quickly withdrew. There would be plenty of time for long, teasing foreplay later.

"Ah, so you will rush things tonight. Not well done, hmm?" She attempted to free her hands, but he threaded their fingers together and held her steady. With a tiny huff, she canted her hips, sending him deeper.

"Can I help it if I can't wait to claim you? This is but one time; life will give us many more couplings." Then he penetrated her all over again, just as slowly as before even though the friction hurtled him closer to the edge.

"I adore that about you." After a few moments, she matched his movements and soon they worked together in a leisurely, unhurried rhythm that brought the same pleasure of their last coupling but in a deliciously exaggerated fashion.

Moans broke the silence and blended with the slight icy sound of snowflakes hitting the window glass. Sweat cooled his skin from his exertions. And still he didn't rush his strokes. Neither did he close his eyes. He held Felicity's gaze, lost himself in those endless blue-green pools, and that intensified connection gave a renewed edge to every jolt of bliss that shot through his veins. Having emotions behind this act truly did enhance it, and once more the sensation of falling assailed him. Not coming together in a frantic vortex was satisfying, and he rather enjoyed the change of pace. How did he think he could have maintained the life of a rogue when he truly was a man who needed the stability of marriage?

I can't wait to spend the rest of my life doing this.

"Hugh..." That breathless utterance brought him back to the present. She tightened her fingers in his. "Finish me. I am breaking apart." Her head thrashed back and forth while one of her hands stole between their bodies to bedevil the bud at her center.

Damn and blast, but it was the most erotic sight.

"That is the idea, my love." His chuckle died quickly as need swept up his shaft. Release was near. He increased his pace. Each thrust went deep, penetrated hard, and irrevocably joined them. Each stroke stole his ability to breathe. "Lissie, please tell me you're ready." Desperation ravaged his voice. It wouldn't be long.

"Yes." She drew her legs up toward her chest. A keening wail escaped her lips, quickly followed by a hiccup that sent an interesting feeling through his shaft. Her eyelids shuttered closed. The tremors flooding her body transferred to him and further dragged him into the storm they'd both created. "Almost there." Her breathing changed to pants. "Touch me."

"Of course." He shoved a hand between their bodies, pushed hers away, then slipped his fingers along her slick flesh until he found the swollen nubbin. It took next to no time to bring her straining at the edge of bliss. Need tightened his stones, making them heavy and pulling close to his shaft.

Awareness raced up his shaft. It throbbed, primed and ready. “We go together.”

She was too far gone to answer, and when she plucked at one of her nipples, he lost his hold on control.

Once. Twice. Three times he stroked, and she lifted her hips, meeting him. A scream ripped from her throat before she muffled it by biting her bottom lip. Her inner muscles fluttered around him, squeezing his length, drawing out his descent into madness as she fell through that joyous void. Hugh stifled his own shout and thrust deep one last time. His grasp on reality shattered. As his member pulsed, he ground his pelvis into hers to prolong the sensations.

“I love you,” he whispered against the shell of her ear. Spent and exhausted, he released her hands and collapsed on top of her body, unwilling to break their connection.

Her breathing warmed the side of his face and neck as she returned to the present, and her fingers slipped down his back as she clutched him to her. “I love you as well.” She took a shuddering sigh and relaxed beneath him. A few silent minutes passed before she spoke again. Residual trembles transferred to him and his shaft that was still embedded in her body. “That was an amazing session.”

“I’m glad I could please you.” After brushing his lips over hers, he wrapped his arms about her. “Nothing is better than seeing you content and sated, except maybe learning how else you enjoy being pleased. I look forward to all that now your thorns have dissolved.”

“Ha.” Felicity clung to him. A faint flush covered her chest and the tops of her breasts. “Only after I do the same to you.”

He claimed her lips. How could he not? “Any man who said you knew nothing of kissing is a bloody idiot, and I have gained a jewel in you.”

Thank heavens for that.

A hiccup mixed with a snuffle came from her. “I suppose the man makes the difference.”

“Indeed, he does.” Once more he kissed her then he rolled them both over onto their sides and he simply held her. “I would like to marry within the next month or so, for obvious reasons, and because I can’t wait to start our lives together.”

“Oh, Hugh, you are such a romantic.” Her lips grazed the side of his neck. “But I quite agree, merely because the thought of sneaking about to be with you feels wrong.” Up and down one of her hands moved along his spine, and with every pass, renewed awareness for her tingled through his body. “We must have a bit of decorum around your daughter, after all.”

“True.” A chuckle escaped him. “Thank you.”

She frowned. “Whatever for?”

“Being so frightened of mice that I was prompted to help expel it, which led to scandal and our engagement.” He nudged his nose into her hair. “And for being brave enough to let me in despite your cloak of prickles.” That had made all the difference.

“Thank you for not giving up when you had every opportunity.” The words were tear-choked, and then she hiccupped, and everything was right with the world again.

They lay together for a long time before he stirred. “Perhaps we should go upstairs.”

“To your rooms?” she asked, and there was such hope in that inquiry, he didn’t have the heart to deny her.

“If you promise to return to your own bed before Jane awakes.” And he kissed her again because he hadn’t nearly had enough of her soft lips.

“I promise, but if we come together a second time tonight, you might need to wake me, for you are quite potent and you exhaust me.”

“Then I am pleasuring you correctly.” There was so much more to share with her, and he couldn’t wait to start.

Sometimes, the good things in life only happened when one pushed past expectations and the fear that held one

captive. The view from behind that wall was magnificent.

Epilogue



June 1, 1820

Tulip Place

No. 2 Chapel Street, Grosvenor Square

London

Hugh whistled a jaunty tune as he came into the drawing room. His business had concluded early today, the counting house was thriving, England was still the most powerful country in the world, and in a few days, he would travel to Brighton to retrieve his daughter from boarding school where she was just completing her second year there.

“Good afternoon to my wonderful wife,” he said the second his gaze landed on Felicity, who sat on a low sofa with her feet propped on a footstool with an embroidered cushion.

“How lovely that you are home early.” There was such pleasure in her smile that it prompted one of his own.

“If you’d like, we can go on a drive. The day is quite beautiful.” Once he’d closed the distance, he leaned over her and briefly kissed her lips.

“I would indeed enjoy that. It will be nice to spend some time outside.” There was an unfamiliar gleam in her beautiful eyes that gave him pause. “First, though, I would like the opportunity to talk with you.”

Immediately, worry knotted in his belly. “Oh? Is all well?” He sank onto the cushion next to her.

“I believe so.” When she turned to him, she took one of his hands. “In a year, Jane will be launched into society. It will

be at her discretion on how she would like to fashion her future.”

“Of course. We will support her in whatever she chooses.” Over the past year, her drawings and sketches had improved exponentially, and that talent shouldn’t go to waste. Perhaps she would wish to study further somewhere on the Continent with masters, or perhaps she would like to pursue marriage. It had been a while since he’d talked with her about her goals. With a squeeze to Felicity’s fingers, he frowned. “Don’t keep me in suspense.”

“All right.” She blew out a breath as she held his gaze. “You are as aware as I am that our hopes for a child have been dashed more than a few times over the course of our union.”

“Yes.” His swallow was heavy, for each had been heartbreaking. “And?” Was it possible their luck had changed?

Her smile was a bit lopsided, but it was her hiccup that gave the news away, for it meant she was excited. “My menses have been absent for a few months, so while you were at the counting house this morning, I had a midwife call. She performed an examination.”

“And?” The suspense, the anticipation, would kill him.

“And she suspects I am just over three months along in a pregnancy. In early November, if all goes well, we should have a babe within our midst.” This time when she smiled, the gesture twinkled in her eyes. “Are you pleased?”

“Another child.” Wonder and gratitude pushed through his chest. They had been married for just over two years, and thus far, there had been no offspring. Instead, they’d had plenty of disappointments. “Of course I’m pleased.” Easily, he tugged her into his arms and held her close. “It’s a wonderful surprise.” Unable to help himself, he kissed her lips. “I’m so proud of you, beyond excited to be a father again since Jane is nearly grown. Mother and Father will be so pleased.” Over the past year, his father’s health had declined, so perhaps the news of a new grandchild would help spruce him up. “How will this affect your music lessons?”

A few months after they'd returned to London from their wedding trip to America where everything had been startlingly different from the life they led in England, Felicity had decided to turn the downstairs parlor into a music salon where she offered voice and piano lessons to young ladies within the *beau monde*. She had quite the client roster, and it wouldn't surprise him in the least if they would need to move to a larger townhouse soon.

"It shouldn't, unless symptoms of pregnancy get the better of me for that day."

"And your own engagement schedule?" Beyond teaching, she had fulfilled her dream of playing and singing in front of crowds, and she'd been a part of many musicale evenings as well as private parties.

"I shall manage that too." She pulled back from him enough to peer into his face. "Though I'm excited, I'm a bit frightened. So much can go wrong."

"Don't think of that right now. Just enjoy this moment." Then he bounded up from the sofa and pulled her with him. "Come. Let us go for that drive. I want to shout my good fortune to everyone we encounter."

Felicity snorted then hiccupped. "Please don't do that. We have managed two years without a scandal."

"At the end of our drive, we shall pop in on my parents and tell them, and if you wish, yours as well." He didn't care, for he was the happiest of men. "But know this. If something does go wrong, I will still love you to distraction, will still have a wonderful life because I have all that I need, all I could ever want."

"Thank you. A woman's worth should never be tied to whether or not she can have children or even want them." She wiped at the tears on her cheeks. "Perhaps once we come home, we could retire early tonight? Ever since I have suspected I might be increasing, I have felt very much in a romantic mood."

Heat went up the back of his neck. His wife constantly surprised him. “I would enjoy that above all things.”

“Then let us not delay further. I’m certain once the staff realizes my condition, they will be in a frenzy of celebration and pampering.” She shrugged. “I dread that added attention.” Then she frowned. “What if Jane isn’t pleased?”

“You know her well enough by now to realize Jane will be over the moon.” This he knew for a fact, for she was always saddened to hear of the little heartbreaks through their letters. He tugged her into his arms merely to kiss her slowly and leisurely. “Ah, Lissie, every day that I’m fortunate enough to wake up beside you, I thank the Creator for such a gift, and that gratitude only grows.”

“Such gammon, but it is what makes you so endearing.” She framed his head with her palms. “You are going to be a wonderful father; you are already that with Jane as well as a lovely provider, especially in the face of all the changes we have encountered.”

“Change is just another opportunity to find our path and meet our goals.” Once more he kissed her, then because he thought he might burst from happiness, Hugh tugged her to the drawing room door and called loudly for the butler. He glanced at her with a grin that felt all too cheeky. “Let us start the celebration and then go on that drive. Today is a most wonderful day, and perhaps I can convince the cook to make those little sponge cakes I adore.”

“With a dollop of delicately whipped cream?” Felicity asked with a chuckle, for he enjoyed his sweets rather too much upon occasion.

“Of course!”

Never had he thought he would break free from the cloud of loneliness he’d fallen into after losing his first wife and being estranged from his daughter, but the accidental and scandalous meeting of this one woman—his new wife—had completely upended his world, and he would always marvel of that fact.

Allowing fear to guide one's life and make them hide behind prickles or vices did more harm than good. So much time was wasted when one didn't face those things head on, but then, life was a mix of growth and learning, and if one was quite fortunate, that would never stop.

The End



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[*The Magic of Christmas* \(Diamonds of London #4\)](#)

[OR](#)

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[*Along Came Tess* \(Diamond of London #6\)](#)

Recipe for Savoy Cake (sponge cake)

Beat well together the yolk of eight eggs and a pound of sifted sugar, and whisk the whites till of a solid froth; then take six ounces of flour and a little sifted cinnamon, and mix all the ingredients lightly together; after which rub a mould with fresh butter, fill it three parts full with the mixture, and bake it in a slack heated oven.

From *The Art of Cookery*, by John Mollard, 1802

Victoria Sponge Cake

(though there were variations of the sponge cake in the Regency, it wasn't until the Victorian era that it became all the rage due to the queen's love of the sweet)

INGREDIENTS

- 4 eggs
- 1 cup Granulated sugar
- 1 cup less 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 1/3 cup flour (sift flour after you measure it)
 - 2 1/2 teaspoons of baking powder
 - 1/4 teaspoonful of salt
 - 2 teaspoons of vanilla extract
- Any kind of jam (strawberry or blackberry, etc.)
- Powdered sugar for dusting
- 2 Springform Cake Pans (Loose bottom cake tins)

Whipped Cream

- 2 cups heavy whipping cream
- 1/2 cup of powdered sugar (I use less since I don't like whipped cream overly sweet)
 - 1/2 teaspoon vanilla

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 F.

Butter and line the bases of 2 x 18cm (7in) cake pans with parchment paper.

Place the flour into a small mixing bowl and stir in the baking powder.

In another bowl cream the butter & sugar, add the eggs and continue to blend.

Add flour and vanilla, continue to blend.

Make sure the mixture slowly falls off a spoon when held sideways. If it doesn't add a teaspoon of hot water.

Divide the mixture between the 2 springform cake pans

Bake for 30-35 minutes or until a skewer inserted into the middle comes out clean.

Next, let them cool in the pans for a few minutes, then turn them out to cool completely on a wire rack.

Spread the jam and whipped cream on one half of the cake and then place the other half on top.

Dust the top with powdered sugar for a simple cake or dress it up with whipped cream on top.

Baker's note: if you want to make these into smaller cakes fit for a tea tray, simply use a small round biscuit cutter to cut (or a star cookie cutter, etc.) to cut out forms from the larger cakes. Then proceed with the directions.

Whipped Cream

With a mixer beat the whipped cream until it starts to get thicker (about 2 minutes)

Add the powder sugar and vanilla and beat for another minute or 2 until desired consistency.

Regency-era romances by Sandra Sookoo

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Author Bio

Sandra Sookoo is a USA Today bestselling author who firmly believes every person deserves acceptance and a happy ending. That is why her characters are not in the usual style and oftentimes struggle with things out of the norm. She's written for publication since 2008. Most days you can find her creating scandal and mischief in the Regency-era, serendipity and happenstance in the Victorian era, or historical romantic suspense complete with mystery and intrigue. Reading is a lot like eating chocolates—you can't just have one book. Give her the chance with one book and you'll be hooked.

When she's not wearing out computer keyboards or mice, Sandra spends time with her real-life Prince Charming in Central Indiana where she also runs a gourmet cookie business and makes moments count with the man because the key to life is laughter. Inspired to storytelling by Walt Disney since the age of ten, when her soul gets bogged down and her imagination flags, a trip to Walt Disney World is in order. Nothing fills the well and fuels her dreams more than the land of eternal happy endings, hope and love stories.

Stay in Touch

Sign up for Sandra's monthly newsletter here: [subscribepage.io/OP871c](https://www.subscribepage.io/OP871c)

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